

Shannon O'Connor

There is a Light that Never Goes Out

"No. I don't even know why I'm here. I shouldn't be. You should let me go home now."

"I don't think we can do that. You must be here for a reason, and we'll find out why." Carlene knew how to play the game. All she had to do was say the right things and she could get the best privileges and be out of that hellhole in no time.

The doctor was a balding dark-skinned man with an accent. He may have been Middle Eastern or Indian, but Carlene did not care. All she cared about was pulling a ruse on him.

"I feel fine, I really do," she said.

"Are you having any disturbing thoughts?" he asked her.

"No, not at all, my mind is totally clear."

"Do you feel that people are watching you, or trying to come after you?"

"No, I don't."

"Are you having any feelings of wanting to hurt yourself?" the doctor asked. He wrote some things down in the folder in front of him.

"No, not at all," she said.

"I think I'll give you patient escort privileges. That way you can go outside with one of the patients who have full grounds. Is that okay?"

"That's great!" Carlene was amazed. She didn't think she would get such good privileges so soon. She was talented at playing the game.

She knew why she was here. It was just a stop before she got to where she was really going. She was going to Love Street, a mystical place where people were happy and free and had fun all the time.

Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4

Nobody had to work because the owner was filthy rich and he gave everyone money. It was the perfect society.

There, at Love Street, Carlene would fulfill her life's destiny as the savior of the universe. She did not know why she had to come to this hospital first; her parents made her. All they did here was ask ridiculous questions and try to make her drink the evil elixir. She knew if she drank it, she would come down, and her world would disappear. And she did not want that to happen. She wanted to have Love Street and everyone there.

In the locked unit, time seemed to stand still for some people. There was one young woman who had her hair teased up, with Vaseline on her face and she was dancing and saying, "Yeah, the drum corps when I was fourteen years old. He did it to me. It's all his fault!" She danced around gyrating her hips.

Carlene just sat there and ogled like everyone else. The girl's name was Gloria.

"G-L-O-R-I-A," Carlene muttered to herself. She knew this was her. She had to talk to her. The magical Gloria. She must know the truth. The truth was everywhere in this place. It reeked of stale cigarette smoke and favors of another realm.

Carlene sat next to where Gloria was dancing. "Gloria," she said to her. "Were you in a drum corps?"

"Yeah, I was. It was a horrible thing. They try to take your brain out there."

"What instrument did you play?" Carlene asked.

"I played the mellophone. I could have played anything, but I liked to be mellow!"

"That's perfect!" Carlene knew this was must be a sign. "I played the mellophone, too. I was in the band when I was in high school."

The nurse came in to see Carlene, handing her a cup with liquid in

Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4

it. "Here Carlene, take this, it will make you feel better."

"I don't need to, I feel fine," Carlene said.

"You have to take it," the nurse said.

"I'm not taking that!" Carlene screamed. "You can't make me!"

The nurse held out the little cup. "Take it, Carlene, or we'll have to put you in the quiet room."

"NO, I'M NOT GONNA TAKE IT!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. She did not want to succumb to the darkness.

She frightened everyone on the unit. Everyone came out to see what was happening, to see Carlene acting out of control.

"You have to take it Carlene, it's for your own good," the nurse said.

"No, it's not, you're just trying to control me!" she shouted. "I hate you all, it's not my life!" But then she realized, that if she took it, they would let her out. Carlene took the medicine, and when she took it, she liked to pretend it was a shot glass and she would take it quickly, as if she were drinking tequila.

Carlene liked to talk to people when she was there. She wasn't very friendly in her normal life, but there, she was a different person. She talked to Missy, a girl from the wrong side of the tracks, and they would laugh together. There was one young man who was very polite and kind, named Art, and Missy talked to him one day and she looked down at his feet and said, "Boy, you have big feet! You know what that means!" Art didn't know, but Carlene laughed. "She knows what it means," Missy said, winking.

Carlene was an inpatient at the hospital for two weeks. They let her out on the condition she would go to the day hospital. She agreed; she just wanted to be free. When she walked out the door, it was like she stepped into another world. She knew the outside was different than the hospital. She knew it wasn't safe. She couldn't just go and talk to people that she did not know. The world was a dangerous place. She had to be

Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4

wary.

Carlene lived downstairs from her parents. They let her live rent-free in the apartment: the kitchen was gutted, there was no bathroom; the place was a disaster. Carlene had put curtains in the bedroom and the hallway, so she did not have to look at the kitchen. But she had to whenever she went upstairs where she ate and went to the bathroom. Downstairs in her private hideaway, she danced around and talked to her people at Love Street. She listened to her music and wrote frantic poetry. Music spoke to her: every song she heard was a message from God. She lived in her fantasy world, but when she left her house to go to the day hospital, she put on her sane face and acted like a regular person, or at least she tried.

On the days after she got out of the hospital, she would walk around the city and look at things. She was amazed by the world. She had never noticed how colorful it was and how many vibrant sounds and smells there were. Carlene sat in cafes and drank coffee and wrote poetry. She painted a picture of the world that she saw with words.

Carlene looked everywhere for a blue tree. She wanted to find trees that were different colors than the usual ones. In the fall there were multicolored trees, but they were warm colors like red and yellow and orange. But she could not find a blue tree anywhere. She knew there were some at Love Street. She knew she had to get there somehow, but she did not know the exact location.

One day, at the hospital, the gardeners planted a Japanese maple in the middle of the little square where the people sat near the outpatient center. Carlene gasped when she saw the tree. The leaves were almost purple. She had found her sign.

There was a woman in the day hospital named Patience. She was older, and she always wore sundresses and she liked to read science fiction books and watch Star Trek. She wasn't as sick as Carlene. She was on her way to getting better again. Carlene talked to her and one day they discussed God.

"God is always there, even if we don't know it," Carlene said. "I

Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4

don't know why people don't realize that."

"Some people don't want to see," said Patience.

"Even if things seem to be their worst, there's always hope. The sun is perpetually shining behind the clouds. Something is there watching us, knowing."

"Yes," answered Patience. "That's true."

"What do you think about God?" Carlene asked.

"I've never seen God. I don't know if he exists. But I like to believe. It gives me comfort sometimes when I'm alone in my apartment, and I don't have anyone to talk to. I talk to God. But only if I know that nobody's listening."

"It's Ok to talk to God if people are listening. They'll know you're one of the chosen."

"I don't know about that," Patience said, hanging her head.

"I do. Trust me."

Carlene stood up and broke a leaf off the purple tree. She crumpled it in her hand and walked away from Patience, smiling serenely as she left.

Shannon O'Connor received her B.A. in English Literature from the University of Massachusetts at Boston. She has been published in Up Dare, Chord and previously in The Wilderness House Literary Review. In her spare time, she enjoys collecting cows, photography, and drinking coffee.