

Charles Hayes

All Things Must Pass

Every hour, morning until night, the raspy sound of the buzzer reverberated through the ward. That meant it was time to line up in front of the heavy steel door for a cigarette break. My ward was on the third floor of a brick building that stood among many similar buildings that were spread out over hundreds of acres. Heavy reinforced screens were on all the windows that ensured there was no way in nor out except through the door where the cigarette line began. Immediately on the other side of the door and off the hall was the smoke room.

It was the buzzer that woke me that first morning at the state hospital. I could remember how I got there--no one could forget that--but I couldn't remember exactly what had happened after that. All I could recall was that it had been very dark and that I had been taken into the ground floor of a building that had no lights except for a couple of pale yellow bulbs in the entry room. There had been some white coats with a needle who apparently had given me a shot while the cops removed the leg chains. Now, there were all these people lined up in the hall outside my room. Besides the bed I was on there were six others, all vacant and made up. I was alone.

*

The room was without a door so I could clearly see the people in the hall. They were all male, a mixture of young and old, big and small. Some were dressed in hospital gowns and others in plain street clothes. All were holding their cigarettes, ready for fire.

One of the aides, a young woman, entered the room and asked if I smoked. She said that if I did, now was the time to line up for the break. Having no cigarettes, and too worried to care, I replied that I was out of smokes and guessed that I was going to quit. She offered me a couple of her's but I refused. However, she insisted so I took the cigarettes and any thoughts of quitting were quickly forgotten. Not dissimilar from the Marine Corps, I assumed smoking was encouraged as a means to exert further control. Shortly after I took the cigarettes and got in line the door was unlocked and we were allowed out and into the smoking room. There we smoked as many cigarettes as we wished in the next ten or fifteen minutes. It was one of the big deals of the ward. Another big deal was meal time. The same procedure was followed except, instead of going in the smoke room, we were shuttled down in the key operated elevator and herded as a group over to another building that housed the cafeteria. The food was not bad. Better than the marines and what I was able to cook up at home. After we had eaten, the process was reversed.

*

That first day I was allowed to make a phone call back to Fox Run, get a hold of Jeff, and ask him to feed the dogs until I could get back. Jeff and I had stacked some cases of beer over the fence at my shack. I told him to take them in return for his help. That took care of my worry about my dogs. I had no idea what was coming next or how long I would be there. No information was provided by the staff and I quickly learned that tak-

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

ing stock of what I could observe was the best way to learn things around there.

*

The process of getting through the withdrawal and shock of the first few days was structured so that the pills came regularly. That was also done in long lines where one filed up to a split door with a dispensing shelf on the bottom half and the top half fully open. The pills had to be taken at the door and the staff checked to see that they were and not hidden somewhere to stockpile for a later suicide.

While in line, I learned that the guys in hospital gowns were the ones that found it hard to get out of bed. Next to me in line was a younger guy about my height, an athletic build, and long wavy brown hair over clear intelligent eyes. Except for the blue gown, he could have been almost any young college student. From a small town not far away in the Kanawha Valley, he was friendly in a mild sort of way. I found him much easier to talk to than many of the so-called normal people that I had met. He said that he had been there two years and really didn't like it. The medicine was hard for him to tolerate. It made him feel like he wasn't all there. All he wanted was to go home, but so far there hadn't been a hint that that was going to happen. Clearly depressed about it all, he still managed to smile some. When we got to the medicine counter I saw that he was given a large dose of liquid Haldol, a major antipsychotic drug. I only got the normal detox stuff which was just a sedative of one kind or another. That was all the aide giving the medicine would tell me. I still hadn't seen a doctor or a therapist so I only had the fact that I didn't get knocked out to go by.

About an hour and a half later I saw the same guy that I had been next to in line coming toward me down the hall with a gait that looked a little strange, sort of stiff and mechanical. I figured that he was just showing recognition with a little skit like some people do when they see someone they know. But as we passed and I was about to greet him his eyes told a different story. They were vacant and saw nothing. Where they had been clear and intelligent before they were now cloudy and fixed. I just stood there and watched him pass, looking like something out of Frankenstein. He was not the same young man that I had spoken with a short while before. That man was gone and in his place was this medical model that no one would know. A few days later coming back from the cafeteria, right before meds, he made a run for it over an embankment into the woods before anyone could stop him. Later he was back after being apprehended by the sheriff in his hometown. I would look in the door of his room sometimes and always he was sleeping. How he ate was a puzzle to me. The whole thing smacked of injustice. I began to keep a journal.

*

The other occupants of my room were drinkers and about the same age as me. Seems that all the drinkers were housed in that one room while the psychiatric patients were housed in other rooms throughout the ward.

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

The treatment program for the drinkers was a 28 day process. It was always full and when one class would finish another new class would start. That was when the people in my room could expect to move to a new building.

*

I finally saw a treatment team that consisted of a doctor, a psychologist, and a social worker. They tried unsuccessfully to diagnosis me so I was put me on three different kinds of pills. I figured that I was getting shot gunned for a broad range of disorders. I was not happy about it and could see that the process was thoroughly lacking in anything that could get me moved along and out of there. The pills caused me to nap often and it was during one of those naps that I had a nightmare. In it I was under attack by the Viet Cong in the Nam. I was terrified, alone, and out of ammunition as a single VC casually walked toward me with his AK-47 at the ready. I wanted to scream for help but I could make no sound. The VC just kept coming forward with that determined look that said I was dead. The more I tried to scream the worse it got. There was nothing I could do but still I continued to furiously struggle to scream. The VC walked up to the edge of my bunker, looked down at me with a face that now showed very little, and aimed his AK at my head. Knowing that I was going to die, my scream finally burst loose in a long wail. As I jerked awake and sat up on the bed, I saw the young aide who had shaken me awake for meds. He was jumping back in horror, his eyeballs as big as saucers. And he was screaming too. All this happened in just a flash before we both realized what had happened and just looked at each other. I felt embarrassed and didn't know what to do so I just laughed. And he laughed. I apologized and he said that it was ok, that he would get over it. Then I went to get his meds.

*

The next time my treatment team saw me they said that they didn't think my problem was about alcohol, that I was being classified as a psychiatric case. I figured that if I didn't have to go through a month long treatment program maybe I could get out of there sooner. That possibility gave me hope.

I tried to stay in shape by doing exercises on the floor in the mornings. Always up before the lights came on, I would do my little routine, shower, and get the coffee urn going. I had inherited it from one of my roommates who had gone into alcohol treatment. Most of the patients had a constant craving for caffeine. I could get coffee from the commissary, brew it up, and sell it for a dime a cup. I made about three bucks a day.

*

I was adjusting quickly to the loony bin and faithfully keeping my journal. One of the staff saw me writing in it and inquired about what I was doing. I just said that I was writing down the things that happened there. The aide, an older woman, just let it go but I could tell that she didn't like it. She seemed about to stop me but thought better of it. I had

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

no doubt that I was in a real cuckoo's nest. It was better than any Hollywood could invent. And to get a script of it was just too much to pass up.

*

The only therapy that I was exposed to was an arts and crafts class. I painted with watercolors. The others did similar things and for a couple of hours we got our creative fix. I took it in stride but I could not help feeling the nature of the whole thing was the ultimate in custodial care.

There were also lots of escapes, recaptures, and fights with the throwing of chairs, the whole nine yards. But most people were so incapacitated that they could only do minimal damage.....except for the drinkers. They didn't get the tough meds like most of the others. They could be very tricky when it came to little scams to make life more interesting. The major events would usually involve an escape to one of the bars in the city just beyond the fences. One of the guys in my room got away one day and simply returned in the middle of the night, drunk and raising hell. They put him in a padded room and he literally raised hell and pounded the door all night long. He was not very big and I was amazed at his stamina and strength in communicating to the world how fucked up he thought it was. It reminded me of myself.

That little guy was good with women too. A dance was held in one of the buildings with a big dance floor where women and men were allowed to mix. The hell raiser took the woman that I had unsuccessfully tried to warm up and had her talking and laughing in one dance. Or maybe it was because I was just too rigid and he was more lighthearted. Being with the women was a very big deal but it was closely monitored and progressed to nothing more than an old fashioned social.

*

I met a nice looking woman in arts therapy who knew the daughter of one of my neighbors on Fox Run. They had gone to highschool together. She seemed happy and well adjusted. Friendly, sociable, and comfortable in her own skin, she was a rarity there at the state hospital. It surprised me when I learned that she had been there 15 years. It was her home. I figured that it took all kinds, but that kind of home was not for me.

Ironically, it was the spunky little alcoholic who was good at escapes and with women that showed me the way out. I had never talked to him. In fact I kept pretty much to myself and talked very little to anybody. But I didn't miss a whole lot. I suspected that the commitment procedure that had put me there mandated that if I disagreed with my commitment I was entitled to file a petition that ask for a court hearing within 72 hours. I had learned that while working at a hospital in another place. But I had also learned that I was supposed to be able to defend myself in the initial commitment. I hadn't been allowed to say a word. I had been cuffed and chained.

*

I began to feel that my rights had been violated. It always seemed to go that way when dealing with the American legal system--you get what you pay for and I had no money. But neither did the little guy who knew how to play the system. He got bored with pretending that he was wait-

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

ing for a treatment opening, decided that he wanted out of there, and filed one of those petitions for a hearing. I waited and watched to see how they were going to try him but it never happened. Three days later he was freed. I had been there almost two weeks and I wanted out too. So I immediately went to the office and filed the same petition that essentially said that you must let me go or prove you have the right to keep me here. The staff took my application like it was just another kind of treatment modality that was expected to come along at the proper time. Two days later I was called in by my treatment team. That time I did not see the doctor and there were no more pill prescriptions. That was welcome because I had lately been hiding them under my tongue until I could get out of line and remove them. The psychologist was also a Vietnam Veteran. On one previous occasion we had talked some about it. He had been in the army with the tanks down South. He said that I would be released the next day and could go if I wanted. But if I stayed, they would help me get veterans compensation. He acted like it was a done deal but at that point I didn't care. I just wanted out of there. Next I saw the social worker who gave me enough money for the bus ticket and included a referral to my local mental health center.

One wake-up and I was out of there and on the greyhound to its last stop in the southern part of the state. From there I called someone I knew to take me over the mountains to my home on Fox Run.

*

It was during the hot part of the summer and the yard was grown up. My dogs came out from under the house where it was cooler and greeted me. They seemed fine. Since I had passed the word for the river people to come up and take whatever they could find, the garden was bare. I entered my shack and saw that the skillet on the stove was full of maggots from leftover hamburger. Dirty dishes were scattered about. It was pretty dirty, but what I noticed most was that it was so quiet. There were no screams nor fights. No crazy people in my face wanting to know why I was doing whatever I was doing.

A shack and a little piece of earth nestled in the hot summer Appalachians. Without a doubt there would be snakes where the grass was thick. It was a pretty poor place but lovely compared to where I had been. I was home and ready for another run.