

U. Ebiz

Two's a Crowd (The Infinite Spectrum of Normal)

Freedom, psychiatrist Haseen Pychango told herself, comes in many shapes. To some an urge to be left alone. For others an assurance of order. To each a chance to hear the words they feel are true. Even madness no impediment if only you can find a crowd to agree.

"Yes, Maurice," she smiled, "and I know that everyone here will miss you too."

Dr Pychango was startled to experience a small pang of regret. Although privately rather tender-hearted, she was not in the habit of experiencing personal feelings towards her patients.

"Well there's no need for anyone to miss me –" Maurice reassured her as she led him down the long corridor connecting the psychiatric pavilion to the main part of the hospital – "no need at all, I can pop back in at any time –"

Over the past few weeks various diagnoses had appeared appropriate for Maurice McFelix. And yet on closer inspection, none had quite seemed to fit.

"Now you do know we have a follow-up appointment scheduled for you in the out-patient clinic next Thursday, Maurice –"

The medical record impartially categorized his symptoms at the time of admission: his excited babbling and gestures tersely reduced to *flight of ideas, hyper-religiosity, effusive affect* – bipolar disorder had appeared self-evident. And yet, cooperative and friendly, oddly charming with no hint of insincerity, and of no imaginable threat to himself or others, despite his near text-book list of symptoms Dr Pychango had hesitated, on some intuitive inner doubt, before administering sedatives in those early days. The presence of cannabis in his urine toxicology screen – which indulgence Maurice cheerfully acknowledged – certainly justified clinical hesitation. It had taken her a while to achieve this level of professional self-confidence, but Haseen Pychango was not afraid to say to herself, "I can't see what this is yet." She had documented several potential alternative diagnoses in the chart, and a plan to perform further observation without prejudicing the conclusion – without sullyng the diagnostic waters – by chemically restraining Maurice's behavior.

"Well Hercule did ask me to bring in some pictures of her dog –"

Quietly observed in solitude it had appeared that Maurice was likely hearing voices. Oblivious to professional eavesdropping he had entertained enthusiastic discussions with invisible crowds. An optimist, Dr Pychango instinctively held the dreaded diagnosis of schizophrenia at bay, though it could not be responsibly discharged from her list of lurking pathologic categories. The time of onset was classic – Maurice had just turned 21 – the intermittently disordered thought process ominous.

"That's probably not appropriate, Maurice –"

And yet, face-to-face with actual contemporaries, Maurice did not reveal that debilitating coldness or inability to relate to his peers. To the contrary, Maurice made friends. Those first days in the hospital his plea-

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sure had clearly been inappropriate – enchanted by his deep, exuberant voice, the entire unit had taken on a kind of party atmosphere. His voice had an enticing quality, its variations in tone and pitch not dramatic or strenuous but somehow insidiously playful, at once naughty and soothing. Far from being confused or alienated by his own emotions, Maurice seemed to experience them the way most people have rational thoughts – vivid, tangible, specific. And Maurice was everywhere, at the center of endless stories and jokes, the patients his audience, the staff his co-conspirators. Narcissistic Personality Disorder, perhaps, Dr Pychango had pondered? The NYPD officers who had transported Maurice to the Emergency Room – hand-cuffed, intrepidly sermonizing – described the bitter complaints he had provoked in a Christmas crowd outside the Manhattan Salvation Army headquarters, crying out again and again –

“Monotheism is the problem! Free the world from division and strife – outlaw religion now!”

How do you know, Dr Pychango could not silence the question from repeating in her mind: how do you know when there’s a Borderline Personality in the room? Answer: when everyone is fighting with everyone. And yet, Maurice did not feel manipulative, he did not habitually split a room into heroes and devils, and there was no hint of any history of interpersonal conflict. The Salvation Army fracas had been strictly a public affair, perhaps no more than a youthful prank, while on the ward the overall gestalt had become – well, some kind of love fest.

“– and you know CJ told me to bring a shaving cream that won’t make that rash on his cheeks –”

And gradually, over the course of weeks, Maurice’s behavior had come to strike professional observers as – well not exactly normal, odd, yes, vulnerable to be sure, and yet endearing, somehow uplifting – in some ways even to be emulated. Hearing voices? Maurice was a star student actor, he was probably rehearsing a speech. Delusions of grandeur? Who could not expect a shining future for Maurice? Sensuality? Always the center of attention? Maurice was talented and beautiful and he knew it!

“Now Maurice I want you to listen carefully –”

Potential diagnoses had slipped away, unused or mis-fitting, one by one. A popular college student Maurice was also front man for a local rock band: he certainly did not live a life of social exclusion or paucity, but rather seemed to be the natural leader of any crowd he joined. They had definitely seen *something* there for a moment – and yet perhaps, just perhaps, it would all turn out to fall within the infinite spectrum of normal.

“– and Auntie Jane told me not to forget those olives she especially likes –”

“Maurice!”

“Look, Haseen – you don’t mind me calling you Haseen now, do you? You know, as I’ll be outside, and I suppose you won’t be my doctor any more. But I want to make sure you meet my brother, George – I know you’ll adore him, everyone does – he’s the real thing, he’s nothing like me at all – they broke the mold after they made my brother –”

And there, waiting patiently outside the locked psychiatric unit to take his brother home, sat George McFelix. The same fine, even features – Ro-

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manesque, even Hellenic – Dr Pychango observed, the same athletic poise, a more sedate, gloomy version of Maurice.

Dr Pychango had to stifle her surprise – while simultaneously contemplating certain fascinating diagnostic possibilities of this, as yet unexplored, fact: Maurice McFelix was an identical twin.

“Georgie!” Maurice cried out with delight, throwing up his arms to embrace his somber brother, “I’m so happy to see you! Thanks for coming to get me – but hey, I want you to meet Dr Pychango –”

“- she’s my psychiatrist –” George completed Maurice’s sentence for him. “It is an honor to meet you Dr Pychango,” George pensively shook hands, “a-a-and please allow me to express my gratitude for your providing such sensitive assistance to my brother,” and then he turned to scrutinize Maurice. “You OK Mori?” he asked gently, “are you sure you’re –”

“- ready to go home? Oh man!” Maurice was rubbing his hands together, “what a wild place this is! I made –”

“- a lot of friends –” George finished his thought. “Yes, I know, but are you –”

“- ready to behave? Oh sure, sure, Dr P here has really helped me get things straightened out, shown me how to keep things in perspective. You know, I really –”

“- just got carried away. Yes.” George turned back to Dr Pychango. “W-would there be any particulars we ought to be aware of, doctor? Any medication or continued therapy you intend for Maurice to undergo?”

Dr Pychango gazed slowly from face to face. It’s always slightly disconcerting to observe identical twins who are still young enough to appear interchangeable, before life gets a chance to engrave differing paths upon their outward appearance. This duplication of nature is at odds with the usual experience of life as a solitary, or at least a self-contained event. There’s something incorrigibly pleasing in this contradiction of an unexplored prejudice, something quietly amusing about it. Could those identical brain cells really produce the sober, stolid presence of brother George? Dr Pychango had observed a slight hesitancy, even a physical clumsiness in George as he had approached her, and that diffident, formalized manner of speech suggesting a thoughtful, self-conscious shyness. She felt a distinct sensation of relief, almost of vindication, in her decision to release Maurice with no diagnosis beyond *Adjustment Reaction* – essentially a medical term for normal behavior.

“No medicine, George,” she smiled, “just make sure he comes to see us in the clinic so we can keep an eye on him, though, will you?”