

MOLLY QUINN

Therapeutic Recreation

THE DOUBLE DEALER is back in the hospital. He stands at attention in his three-piece suit, waiting to greet the incoming staff. I'm his favorite nurse because my name starts with *D*.

"Dress-down deep discount day, Darlene."

"You got it," I say. He's exactly right. I'm wearing my cheapest scrubs, rubber shoes, and a plastic watch.

He throws his shoulders back. "Doom, duty, do or die."

He always talks this way. Until I met the Double Dealer, I thought clang associations were something you read about in textbooks. I've known him since his first schizophrenic break. He was found behind his college dormitory, hiding in the bushes. I gave him his first dose of Thorazine, told him the voices weren't real, convinced him to bathe and eat. Thirty years later his hair is thinning, and the skin around his bright blue eyes is creased. He's still cycling through the revolving door of the county psych ward, and I'm still punching the clock. Both of us are getting old in this place.

We're short-staffed again. It's just me, Sadio, and Rodney. I've seen Sadio talk a patient out of the crawl space in the ceiling and extinguish a flaming toaster. She works hard even when she's exhausted from doubling to send money to her brother in Somalia. I trust her. But Rodney, like a lot of young guys coming into the profession, considers himself above certain tasks. When a patient acts out he'll grab meds and restraints and bark orders, but he won't neaten rooms, trim fingernails, or soothe someone who's raging or sobbing. During his orientation, I informed him caretaking is the entirety of his job description, and he hasn't liked me since.

"Christ, he's useless," I whisper to Sadio as we walk into report.

She adjusts the pin on her hijab. "He needs a job. You need a job. Same thing. The only difference is, he's grateful."

This is the problem with complaining to another psych nurse—they don't allow you your grievances.

We hold report in the conference room, which used to be the smoker. I remember even further back, when smoking was allowed in the common area, and everyone would light up, including us nurses. When a patient started crying or getting paranoid or agitated, we'd grab an ashtray,

plunk down at a table, and talk it over. Then we'd pour coffee and change the subject to get some perspective, and flip through the newspaper to remember the world outside.

I hit the Play button on the recorder—the only piece of equipment that hasn't changed since the eighties—and the voices of the day staff drone. Instead of taking notes, I put a cherry in my mouth and close my eyes.

The cherries are one of the few pleasures of my workday. I carry them around in my scrub pockets and spit the pits in the corners of the med room, the staff bathroom, the cafeteria. I poise the stone on my tongue, aiming over my shoulder. It bounces off the wall, leaving a speck of red flesh, and lands on the carpet.

Sadio stares at me with the look she gives patients who are acting up. “Why do you still work here if you hate it? Why don't you retire?”

It's a fair question, since I'm almost seventy and like to brag about how smart I've been with my investments, but the truth is, I don't know what I'd do without my job. I never married, never had children, and didn't miss either. My family was here at the hospital. Then slowly the old guard—the staff I considered my friends—quit, retired, and drifted away. Now it's down to me and the building.

Sadio raises her eyebrows, waiting for my answer. A smirk plays around Rodney's mouth. I'm not about to admit that the only life I've made for myself is in this dump.

“Maybe I will retire,” I say, as if I just thought of it.

Sadio laughs loudly, clapping her hands. “No. You love to hate it here.”

“Well, pardon me if my complaints are annoying.” I point at her with a cherry stem. “Unlike the rest of this department, I give a damn. If I didn't spend my own money on snacks and word puzzles, there wouldn't be squat for our patients to do.”

Rodney throws his pen on the table. For a psych nurse, his tolerance for conflict is surprisingly low. “But there is something to do tonight.”

“What, stare at the walls?” Sadio says.

“There's an outing,” Rodney says. “TR staff is taking everyone with privileges to the mall to play mini-golf.”

“No shit.” I eat another cherry. There hasn't been an outing for six months, since the hospital went from government to private.

We file out of report, and everything's a mess. The narc count is short a Klonopin, the laundry bins are overflowing, and one of the shower stalls smells like urine. I carry two lunch trays out of patient rooms, turning my face away from the cold beef soup and warm cottage cheese.

In the midst of lounge tables littered with tissues and dried-out magic markers, Gloria works on a jigsaw puzzle of stallions galloping through a field. Her stuffed hippo, Barnaby, slumps at her elbow. It's the calmest I've seen her in weeks, so I decide not to warn her it's missing a piece—one of the horse's ears.

On the other side of the lounge, Svetlana holds on to the arm rail of the scale, downright pornographic in fuzzy white boots and a leotard. She swings her hair around like a stripper, which is what she was before her commitment. My first task is to get her to take some medication and put on a bra.

The med room is chilly and silent as a refrigerator. The Omnicell beeps at me. It's like a giant, irritable robot. My fingers twinge with arthritis as I hit twenty different buttons to remove Ativan and Zyprexa. I don't have my readers on, and I can barely see the digital print on the screen. The new technology is designed for twenty-year-olds with tiny hands and perfect vision.

I remember when all the medication—including Valium—was stored in jars and taking the edge off a shift was easy. Now there are cameras pointed everywhere, and not just at the patients. Normally I ignore them, but today I'm conscious of that glass eye peering down. I step out of view and glimpse myself in the smudged mirror over the sink. I don't know if it's the fluorescent lights or the second wine cooler I drank last night, but the paunches under my eyes are especially puffy. There's not much I can do about it, so I toss back a cherry and rat my hair a little higher. On my way out of the med room, I shoot the pit at the security camera.

"Nurse Darlene," Svetlana greets me as I approach. "You are so tall, like transvestite."

I hand her the tiny Dixie cup of pills. "I want you to take this. Then go put on a top that covers you up."

She sighs, peers into the cup with disinterest, and looks back at me. "What do you have, cunt or balls?"

"You are not going to find that out."

She gives me a tiny, provocative smile. At this point she could take the pills or spit in my face. It wouldn't be the first time. Her eyes narrow as she looks at my chest. "Oh yes, I see. You have little boobies." She knocks the pills back and goes to her room.

The Double Dealer blurts, "Darlene deports demonstrative diva!"

I turn and see that all the patients have been watching. Everyone loves a show. Floyd laughs loudly, showing gums and a few stray teeth.

Pam looks up from her Bible. Gloria clutches Barnaby, waiting for the attention to return to her. Only Mohammed Mohammed, absorbed in conversation at the window, ignores us. I walk over and ask who he's talking to.

He points to his reflection. "This guy. He looks like me, but he's Christian."

"What's he saying?"

He shakes his head slowly, his lips still moving.

I check on Imelda, even though she's Rodney's patient tonight. She's in bed as usual. When I see her hair matted to the side of her head, I wish I'd insisted on taking her myself. This admission, her catatonia is so bad she can barely groom or feed herself. With her blank eyes and peeling lips, it's easy to see why people write things like "claims to be psychologist" in her chart. But she was—or is—a brilliant one. With some coaxing, she sits on the edge of the bed and allows me to dab Vaseline on her lips. I set to work detangling her hair with a wide-tooth comb. If it was much worse I'd have to cut the matted parts out. After the ECT kicks in, she'll style it herself so the curls are like springs. With lipstick and those big earrings she wears, you'd never know she was the same person.

Back at the desk I check Imelda's chart, and as I suspected, Rodney has been holding her Ativan for days. It's a rookie mistake.

"Why haven't you been giving this?"

"Um, because she's sedated?" he says, as if this is obvious.

I explain to him—very patiently, in my opinion—the difference between sedation and catatonic depression, which the Ativan is meant to treat. Her anxiety isn't gone; it's solidified in her body like lead. "She can barely move."

He wastes ten minutes researching this online before he gets the pill.

When the meal cart is wheeled onto the unit (much too early, like everyone is eight years old or eighty), the patients immediately stop what they're doing and line up. Nappers emerge from their rooms. The galley worker unlatches the metal door with a clank. Once, a patient who was scheduled for discharge to jail told me being in the psych ward is just waiting for meals. He said his whole life would be like that in prison too, except the meals would be worse. I didn't argue with him because I'm not one to gloss things over, and I'm sure not going to tell someone what their experience is. Two hours later, I found him hanging in the bathroom with a shower curtain wrapped around his neck.

We don't have shower curtains anymore. We don't allow plastic bags,

razors, soda cans, shoelaces, sweatshirt strings, or belts. We haven't had real silverware in years. The meal trays come with plastic utensils, which are no match for tonight's rubbery chicken.

After dinner, the patients congregate around the television, sedated by benzodiazepines and *The Real Housewives of Miami*. Floyd grabs the remote and flips to the weather radar. Everyone groans.

"Quiet." He points to a cold front on the screen. "I'm watching troop movements in Meeker County."

Usually when I tell people what I do for a living, they say something like, "Bet there's never a dull moment." But I've seen a few.

At least there's the outing. The Double Dealer stands by the exit. He's tucked a crepe-paper flower in his lapel for the occasion. "Direction of delight," he says, gesturing to the thick, locked metal doors.

I start gathering the patients with off-unit privileges. Pam doesn't want to go but agrees when I tell her she can bring her Bible. I take the remote from Floyd, informing him he won't be allowed to watch the Weather Channel if he stays. Finally, everyone but Gloria is assembled.

When I go to her room, I find Rodney kneeling on the floor. He's peering under the shelving unit, where she's curled into a ball, hugging Barnaby.

"Gloria," Rodney says, "are you hiding from me?"

She lays her head on the tiled floor and smiles.

"Come out, come out," Rodney says in a singsong tone indicating he's lost all control of the situation.

I roll my eyes. "Ish, Gloria. Get your head off that filthy floor and get the heck out from under there."

Gloria looks from Rodney to me with glee. Now she has exactly what she wants: the full attention of the staff. I decide to remove her myself. My knees pop as I squat down.

Gloria lets me drag her out, still conjoined to Barnaby, and looks up with wide eyes. One side of her face is covered in dust. "I feel like hurting myself," she says.

I squirm, remembering the time she got hold of the stapler. That row of angry mouths marching down her thigh. Technically if she says things like this she's not supposed to leave the unit, but I know what's best for her. "You are not going to hurt yourself," I inform her. "You are going to the mall to play mini-golf."

She gazes at Rodney. "What if I want to stay here and talk to my nurse?"

"Too bad," I say. "It's therapeutic."

Gloria gives me one final, pleading look, then trudges over to the group.

There's chaos as Rodney and I get coats and shoes out of lockers. I find a pair of mittens for Floyd. We hand out plastic zip ties for shoes—no laces allowed, not even on outings. I'm looping a tie through Pam's sneaker when Sadio walks toward us. "Sorry, everyone," she says. "Therapeutic recreation staff called—the outing is canceled."

"You've got to be kidding," I say.

Sadio shrugs. "You're surprised?"

I remember when we had more activities than our patients had time for. This was before nursing duties were pared down to data entry and getting the right pills into the right mouth. There's no more karaoke, square dancing, or waffle night. We don't even have proper birthday parties. I remember baking sloppy layer cakes and singing "Happy Birthday" in rounds. We'd give little gifts and say nice things about the birthday boy or girl until they went to bed embarrassed but glad they came into the world.

The Double Dealer hands me his coat. He removes the paper flower from his lapel and crushes it. "Dreary doldrum. Disappointed."

If I were a different nurse, I'd give him a hug. Instead I say, "I don't know what to tell you. That's the way it is."

He crosses his arms. "Darlene destroys destiny."

"That's a little melodramatic, don't you think?" I offer him a cherry, but he shakes his head.

"Do diversional dazzle."

"What does that mean?"

He rolls his eyes. "Darts. Dominoes. Dance. Dreidel. Decoupage."

"You want me to do an activity?"

"Duh."

I remember when he hated unit activities. He thought everything was stupid and refused to participate. The first time he was discharged, he overdosed on his Thorazine and returned to the hospital in an ambulance. After all his years of hard work, the hospital is too cheap to offer him a goddamn thing to do. I look around the lounge at the incomplete decks of cards, broken crayons, the shelves lined with VHS tapes and mysteries so old the pages are yellow and warped. Gloria has returned to the stallion puzzle, which draws closer to its sad conclusion.

"Okay," I tell him. "Come with me."

I unlock the storage closet, thinking there might be some board games. It smells like mothballs and body odor. I can see right away there aren't

any games, just a bunch of old clothes and shoes, personal belongings left behind by patients who have come and gone. One shelf is cluttered with art projects from occupational therapy—wood reliefs, macramé, popsicle stick structures. It's just a bunch of junk, nothing that could make anyone feel better. I'm about to shut the closet when the Double Dealer stands on his tiptoes, straining for a suitcase on the top shelf.

"Easy there." I take it down for him.

He pops the latch. I'm expecting a nest of ratty clothing and shudder, thinking of bedbugs. But when he lifts the lid, the suitcase is full of lace. It's a wedding dress.

"Diaphanous dervish," he breathes.

"How about that," I say.

We lift the dress out together. He holds the shoulders while I take the skirt, and the material floats between us. I wonder how it got to the closet. Some well-meaning community member probably brought it to the hospital service league years ago. People were always giving away weird things, not donating so much as getting rid of stuff.

Gloria comes over. "What's that?"

"Want to try it on?" I say.

She wraps her arms around herself. "No way."

It's easy to talk her into it. I tug the material over her sweatsuit. The waist is the right size, but the arms are too long, and the lace hem pools around her feet. She covers her mouth with both hands.

"Well, look at you, missy," I say. "Check out Gloria, everyone. It's the blushing bride."

"No, don't look at me." She holds her hands up in protest.

The patients come wandering over. Mohammed Mohammed abandons his reflection to watch. And then—I don't know if it's the sound of laughter or the Ativan kicking in that did it—but Imelda is standing in the doorway of her room.

Gloria looks around and beams. "Get me out!"

I unzip her. "Who's next?"

Svetlana tries the dress on. It's the first time I've seen her in something appropriate—she looks perfectly sane. Then the Double Dealer climbs into the dress, right over his suit. He's grinning now, his mood transformed. He whirls, the pale fabric balloons around his waist, and he's completely himself.

Gloria points at Rodney. "I want *him* to wear it."

Rodney holds up his hands, laughing, and points at Sadio, who gets

dressed carefully, as if this is very serious. Her wrapped head emerges from the lace.

“It looks good on you,” Gloria says.

Sadio walks across the lounge with a runway stomp and glances over her shoulder like a supermodel.

“Darlene, don duster,” the Double Dealer says.

Sadio steps out of the dress. Svetlana and the Double Dealer take it from her, gathering the material into a wide, bunched circle of lace. I step in and my arms glide through the sleeves. Gloria zips me up. When I look down, my scrubs have vanished under the white material, which reaches all the way to the floor. Normally I have clothing lengthened because of my height, but it’s as if this dress were made for me. I look up at the security camera and smile for whoever is watching.