

A Glove on My Heart

encounters with the mentally ill



Judith Reynolds Brown

ENCOUNTERS WITH
THE MENTALLY ILL

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HELP!

You come to me waving an official paper:
a letter has passed through your parents'
sparse English to your uncertain tongue.

I telephone a bureau, explain the family's
lack of language. They claim your parents
must appear at a downtown office.

The danger: by a bureaucratic fluke
there's a threat to your family's housing.
I try an explanation. Your English makes
it gobbledygook. It is. I know
I'll not hear if your parents appear
but you'll run to me if they're evicted.

How Can I Keep from Singing?

better than many of his other housemates, however, because they worked together happily in the greenhouse. Peter's move to Simon's room proved to be another significant step, not only in socializing both Simon and Peter, but in helping Peter become competent with English. The two became so fond of each other that much later, when Simon had been judged able to live independently and had moved out, Peter was unable to adjust to his new roommate, and it was decided that he should move out and share a house with Simon. Together both men took happily to independent living.

One winter day a cold took my voice, and at our lesson in the library, when I began to read aloud, Peter hushed my croaking. Instead, with his halting pronunciation, he read aloud from our book on Franklin Delano Roosevelt. We were both beginning to share a great regard for this president. The passage he read told of Roosevelt's dream of a United Nations and of how his sudden death threatened the realization of that dream. My mood that day was down, and quite suddenly there were tears of mourning running down my cheeks, right there in the lesson. To comfort me, Peter patted my knee.

Throughout the time I worked with Peter on language, he often returned to a theme best caught in the poem "If Not This, Still...That," on the following page.

Peter's physical complaints continued to provide reasons he could not work. Some days he claimed he couldn't see, or that there was an eyelash in his eye, or that he'd had a dizzy spell. Since I could never be sure if his complaints were serious enough to genuinely handicap him, I tended to ignore them and suggest we work despite them. He usually went along when I insisted. One day, when he had initially said he was too tired to work, a housemate came to the door of the library in the middle of our lesson, complained that he ached all over, and asked Peter to give him a massage. Shelving his own ailments, Peter got up and we interrupted our lesson so that he and the other man could retreat to the living room. There his housemate lay on the floor while Peter offered his version of a massage. It was a rare resident who was able to get out of himself enough to enjoy doing something for someone else.

I encouraged Peter to listen to the news to improve his English.

birthday. "I'll give you a present any other day," he told Peter, and proceeded to show me his regret at refusing to participate by being more spirited than usual in the other ways he entered into the house's activities. He overcame his usual reluctance to play bingo and joined in. He talked about his part in a Shakespeare play in high school, and how engrossing and exhausting it had been. He made up jokes. In short, that day he was livelier than he was when he was his normal, quiet self. That day I sensed that, either consciously or unconsciously, he was showing me that while he might not celebrate birthdays, he approved of the celebrating world more than I might have thought.

To these two young men the house could be said to have offered more than it usually offered to its residents. It gave each of them a long-term friend, someone who understood his mental handicap. Each of these two young men not only made allowances for his housemate's illness, but at the same time appeared grateful for the sheltering nature of such a friendship. Each of them had yearned for a mate, but that had not yet been their destiny. This connection, this loyalty they had found, was perhaps the next best thing.

CAROL

*Whoopedoo! Someone with
Skill in Her Hands*

I heard Carol before I ever saw her. I hadn't been aware that a new resident was coming. Peter and I were working on his English upstairs in the library one warm day when a cadence of cackling laughter floated through the open window from the covered patio below. Ah, a rare lighthearted woman! We hadn't had an upbeat woman in the house since I'd been there. Let such ebullience spread! Whose was this laugh?

When our lesson was finished I padded downstairs and glanced out onto the terrace. Sitting beside one of the virile-looking men of the house, looking glum, was a young woman whose blond curly hair made her appear younger than her sallow skin suggested. I guessed the laughter had been hers, but now her drooping look belied the glee I had heard. She needed a welcome.

"You must have just come. I'm Judy, a volunteer here."

"I'm Carol. I remember you from when I visited before."

Chagrined that I recalled her only vaguely, I glanced downward and noticed she was wearing a cast on her leg. "What did you do to your leg?"

"I broke my ankle at the hospital. Its okay now. They took the cast off, but now I wear the cast just to protect it."

If her cast had been removed, what had made her decide to put it back on again? It wasn't the time to ask. "Where did they suggest you settle in?" She indicated the single room we often bestow on new residents, then turned to the man she'd been laughing with.

"I fooled them. They wanted to keep me at the state hospital." She held a piece of gray pottery aloft and laughed again. "See what I made in the pottery studio?" The mug in her hand looked like it had been made by a real craftsman. She was justly proud of it.