First Person Account:
How Do I Let Go?

by Win Winship

The article that follows is part of the Schizophrenia Bulletin's ongoing First Person Accounts series. We hope that mental health professionals—the Bulletin's primary audience—will take this opportunity to learn about the issues and difficulties confronted by consumers of mental health care. In addition, we hope that these accounts will give patients and families a better sense of not being alone in confronting the problems that can be anticipated by persons with serious emotional difficulties. We welcome other contributions from patients, ex-patients, or family members. Our major editorial requirement is that such contributions be clearly written and organized, and that a novel or unique aspect of schizophrenia be described, with special emphasis on points that will be important for professionals. Clinicians who see articulate patients, with experiences they believe should be shared, might encourage these patients to submit their articles to First Person Account, Division of Clinical and Treatment Research, NIMH, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rm. 18C-06, Rockville, MD 20857.—The Editors.

We walk on stiff dry grass, bare trees motionless, pointing to a near-perfect blue sky. The only stir is the rustling of the dry leaves beneath our feet. I listen to her and think: Oh God, the pain. I had closed it off so well since the last time ...

(Like Grendel, it crouches there on the fringe of my consciousness, waiting for precisely the right moment to slouch in and mar all the perfect blue domes and scorch the whole brown earth to black.)

“The staff is nice to us, very courteous and polite. The food's not bad.” She kicks a stone in her path. “But they don't let us have seconds on meat or dessert. We get fresh fruit everyday, and with Christmas coming we'll get special things.”

I glance sidelong at her, my sometime daughter, so beautiful, even in her sickness unto death. Surely you've made a mistake, God, not her ...

I say nothing, merely look at my feet as I walk and wait for her to speak again. I pray her words won't come out chaotic and irrelevant. Sometimes, I want to grab what she says out of midair and shove it back in her mouth, demand that she retract what she's saying and tell her, “No, no! You don't mean that!” But when I think it, the darkness around her eyes reproaches me. Stop, they say, You don't know what you're asking. I've been there, I know.

“It's really not bad here. Marie and I are good friends. She gave me a martini last night. She mixed it in a shampoo bottle.”

Outdoors, with night coming on, I'm grateful that here, at least, there is a semblance of order and predictability without the incoherent mumblings and uncoordinated movements and stares of nonrecognition.

You've got it all wrong, God, she doesn't belong here! You've made a mistake! She's intelligent ... she's artistic ... she's got talent ...

... On Tuesdays, she paints ceramic ashtrays in the shape of hearts and stars ...

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With some animation, she tells me about her courses at the “University-Without-Walls.” She is very tired, she says, because she was up late the past few nights studying and practicing chords on the piano, 156 of them. She has to be able to identify any one of them for her final exam. She expects to pass, even though she’s never played the piano.

We trudge down the hill to the gardens. Amid the flowerless shrubs, standing tall, defiant against last week’s freezing rain that bends them to the ground, is a quiescent waterfall and fish pond; the water runs empty except for soggy black leaves. “One of the patients here designed this park, but I think he’s gone now.” I notice her left foot dragging slightly. It does that when she gets tired. I suggest we start back to her unit.

Retracing our steps back up the hill, something comes to me, something I have denied for 9 years. Not the pain—no, no denying that—but the fact that she may not leave here this time. Before, I had known she would get better, and she did. But each time it has taken longer for her to recoup her losses—more medication, more effort—and this time, she seems not so fervent or angry or committed to her cause. She seems, in fact, quite content. Her hallucinations aren’t nearly so bothersome as they once were; they’re not all bad, she assures me, some quite pleasant, actually.

I reckon that now she has crossed over the line that once she drew between herself and “the dopies and the droolies and the druggies.” I brood that maybe there is nothing in my world to draw her back. Heretofore, when the “real world” had become too much for her, she would “dip in and out of psychosis”—or so her therapist said. But now her stays in the never-never land seem to be growing longer and the drugs and psychotherapy less effective. Someday, I feel sure, she will slide irrevocably into the world of her own making and not come back—and what will I tell myself then? The time, the effort, the expertise that has gone into her care and keeping—it was all for naught?

She leads me to what she calls her favorite place, a slab of concrete with a dozen picnic tables stacked away for the season, echoes that there once was a summer. She stops to extract a cigarette from the pocket of her jacket, but she has no match. She stops a fellow patient passing by for a light.

Why does her madness repel me? Why do I ache at the thought of her slipping into an oblivion where I cannot follow? She functions well here. She has everything she needs: food, shelter, friends, caretakers. Why can’t I let her go? She’s better off here, without me. They can give her everything I can ... and more. They can give her what I and the world can’t: permission to be crazy.

Clouds to the west mount as the sun hides just beyond the horizon. The air is as still and cold as the stone steps leading to the residence hall. She says something about the job she might get when she graduates to the halfway house. But there is no future in her voice. And as I have no future to offer her either, we turn toward the place from whence we came.

Here in the usually noisy and always smoke-filled C-2 recreation room, I deposit her, a fragment of my loss and helplessness, and then I walk to my car. I bury whatever grief I can in the night and the cold, knowing it will be resurrected the next time I come—just as surely as the picnic tables will be spread out in the spring and the waterfall will be turned on.

The Author

Win Winship is a writer and the mother of a daughter diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia 15 years ago. Currently, she is writing a novel about the disruption of a family caused by a mentally ill member.