

A refuge

On the 25-minute journey to the psychiatric hospital, I actually felt excited! I doubt if this was how Nick was feeling. I chatted incessantly about how I would be fine after a couple of days and that by Christmas, which was only six days away, all would be well. The hospital was a huge old Victorian asylum which had been used as a war hospital and subsequently as a psychiatric hospital for the area. It could be seen for miles due to its distinctive tower in the centre and had many two- and three-storey wings for wards. At its prime it was a huge community and had its own chapel, gardens and many outbuildings and facilities. In recent years, with the introduction of care in the community, its wards were now mainly empty and in disrepair as its total closure and demolition were imminent during the next few months. Now the site is an executive home residential area. It was in the same village where Nick had grown up and where his family still lived. As a child he had regularly played in the grounds and even cycled around the vast corridors on his bicycle! Now he was bringing his wife to be admitted.

We parked at the main entrance. Nick grasped my hand and carried my bag in the other and we walked up the steps of the main entrance. A security guard nodded at us and asked if he could help. Nick mentioned the ward number and duly was given directions. The corridor of the main entrance was bright and carpeted, with plenty of notice boards and a few displays of the newer, smaller hospitals that would replace it. A few office staff carried out their business. It was initially welcoming. As we turned into the main corridors the change was dramatic. They were deserted. They seemed cold with the classic white and green tiled walls. The sound of our footsteps echoed as we searched for the appropriate sign. In the distance a door banged shut. For a moment all the horrific scenarios of asylums flooded my mind and I felt I was walking amongst the ghosts of shrieking, tormented souls running down those corridors in voluminous, filthy white gowns. It reminded me also of a favourite poem of mine about silence that suggests that the totally silent places are those 'where man hath been' in the past. My heart was pounding and my grasp on Nick's hand tightened as I suddenly felt worried. At that point we found the correct ward, one of the few still operating, and climbed the stairs to it.

Apparently the ward for our particular locality was full that evening so I

was to be initially admitted for one night to an alternative ward upstairs, intended for patients from a different town than ours. I cannot remember the next few hours except for hearing a group of visiting carol singers in the ward, whilst we waited in a small side room. By early evening and after Nick had gone, I went to my bed. The lighting and décor of the ward made a warm, orange glow that seemed to soothe me. When a member of staff came to chat to me, I logically talked to her about the events leading up to my admittance. She listened and patted me on the leg and said that I had obviously been through a terrible time but they were there to help and they would make every attempt to do so. I wanted to hug her. Tactfully she asked if she could just have a little look in my bag for any sharp items and explained it was ward policy. She took a couple of things with her and left me to unpack my bag properly and settle in. I watched her walk out of the room and turned to my bag again. I stroked a small, white teddy bear of Dominic's that Nick had suggested I brought and buried my face in it for any sign of his aroma (just a little), and I briefly thought of his smiling face. I took out my nightdress and dressing gown and laid them on the bed. I then came to my toilet bag and, for some unknown reason, an overwhelming urge to hurt myself erupted from nowhere. It was like a huge surge of hunger that had to be sated. In a wild flurry I searched in vain for anything I could stab myself with. Toothbrush – no. Shampoo – no. Hairbrush – mm, made a dint but no good. Cleanser – rubbish. Emery board – ah, not bad but not good enough. In frustration I used my nails instead and a few minutes later the lovely nurse came back to find me sobbing hysterically and gouging my arms with my own fingernails.

She shouted for more help and immediately grabbed my wrists and sat with me, gently rocking and calming me. As silent tears rolled down my cheeks and I began to relax into the rhythm she had set, I did feel better and the crisis point had passed again. I apologised but she said there was no need and again reminded me that I was there to get better, but that they understood it would take time. She and another nurse then suggested I tried to sleep and helped me into my nightclothes and bed. Little by little other patients seemed to quietly appear and go to bed. I just kept my head down. I did not want to speak to anyone. I tried and tried again to sleep. Time passed by and the ward became darker and quiet. Still I could not sleep. I tried to rock myself back and forth to try to relax and to sleep, but it did not work. Gradually I began to get annoyed so kicked one of my shins with my other heel. Stupid body. If it would not relax, what else could I do with it? Kick, kick, rock. Still no sleep. Who cares? I don't. Kick, kick, bite. I sank my teeth into my forearm too. Eventually I was kicking, scratching, biting and throwing my head against the bedside table in a frenzied, self-abusing attack. Staff came running and I attacked them in my wild, distraught state. I tried to hit and bite them but it was just me I wanted to hurt. They were just in the way. I think there were about four

or five people finally trying to hold me down safely. In the end I dissolved into tears and flopped. They gradually released their holds but I began again to strike out. At last the wave of violence did pass and I sank exhaustedly into a numb, shocked state, mumbling again that I did not want to die, I just wanted my brain switched off for a while. I wanted so much to sleep but I could not do so.

As staff retreated, the same good nurse gently took me by the hand and told me to go with her. Meanwhile her colleague took some blankets from my bed. They led me to the lounge area of the ward where they were based during night duty and settled me into a large, comfortable chair, swathed in blankets. Someone brought me a warm, milky drink and I cradled it in both hands. Little by little I sipped it until it was empty. The cup was taken from me and I was told I could stay as long as I wanted. For a few hours I sat with the staff as they knitted, chatted, embroidered and gossiped away on night duty. Occasionally someone would give me a smile and ask 'Okay?' I would nod and just relax again. I felt so humble and grateful to these people. Earlier I had been trying to head-butt them and now here I was listening to what Christmas presents they had bought for their auntie! Yet in those small hours of that December morning I felt some true calm and relaxation that I had not felt for months. It was the first glimmer of hope for recovery and just being allowed to sit, with no pressure in any way, was a terrific healing mechanism. Just as some of the night staff had let me sit with them in the maternity ward back in April, this approach was just what I needed at this stage too.

At last I said I thought I might be able to sleep so I was taken back to my bed. It had been remade in my absence and looked inviting – a small touch but important. The nurse took the blankets from my shoulders and tucked me up, stroking my forehead as she wished me sweet dreams. I slept until it was daylight and realised everyone else had been up for ages. I presume there had been instructions not to disturb me. The nurse who had been with me all along brought me a drink and some toast and said she was going off duty. She explained that I would be moving up to the correct ward later on and that she wished me well. One sense of disappointment I have still today is that I cannot even remember what this lady looked like, her name or anything other than the kindness she showed me. She and her colleagues were excellent in that ward and their patients were honoured to have them.

I dressed, which was expected during the day at this hospital, and packed my bag again. One of the new staff came into the ward and said she would take me down to where I was supposed to be, as there was now a bed available. I had to have two nurses to escort me down, presumably in case I struck out again. The first ward had been decorated in warm colours. Downstairs the first thing that occurred to me was how cold it appeared, everywhere painted with pale blue. I was told to sit at one of the

tables in what appeared to be a dining area. One of the nurses who had brought me down attracted the attention of a member of staff on this ward, passed her a brown file, nodded in my direction, waved and left. The lady she had given the file to glanced at me and disappeared into a small room. I was left with my bags, sitting at a table. I was aware of other people sitting at other tables. I did not know who were the staff, patients or visitors. The absence of uniforms makes such places very confusing. Every now and then someone would appear from the small room but head off in every direction but mine. Amid the bustle of people, hum of conversations and a cleaner doing her job, I began to feel isolated and frightened. I wanted to rock myself but just stared at the table instead. The sounds around me seemed to get louder and louder and, as my fears grew, I felt I was falling into a huge hole. To 'save' myself I felt the urge to hurt myself rise again. Little by little, I began to dig my nails into the back of my hands. Where was someone? What were they doing leaving me here 'alone in a room full of strangers'. I smiled as I realised that was a cue for a song but immediately panicked and scratched more deeply. By the time someone did come to me my hands were bleeding.

The person noticed my hands, looked at them, tutted and told me it was a stupid thing to do. I was shown into a tiny room with three high-backed chairs and a table in it and told that someone would see me soon. I was left alone again. Eventually another lady came in and said that because I had done all this damage to myself and towards the staff, then consequently there was no way they could let the baby anywhere near me at the moment. She said that even if they did have the staff to cover the Mother and Baby unit they could not let me use it as it would not be safe for everyone concerned. In my current state of mind I did not care. I did not want to see Dominic. I did not want to see anybody. Once again I was left alone. I could hear some Christmas music playing somewhere. I hated it. I hated everything, especially me. In this bare room the only decoration was a small, plastic holly ornament on a solitary nail in the middle of a vast, pale blue wall. The door was slightly ajar. I snatched the holly off the wall, flung it out of the room and smacked my head against the naked wall. I pushed a chair out of the corner and crouched in the space it had been, rocking and sobbing.

At last I was aware someone was in the room. A brief glance up and I saw a young, smartly dressed man watching me. He asked me a few questions and I ignored him. In my head I was using swear words I hardly knew, let alone use. In the end I did swear at him to mind his own business. I do not swear normally. Once, as a teenager, I did use the 'f' word for effect with some of the 'in' girls in my class. They were amazed but laughed at me because they said it did not suit me. I felt so uncomfortable and embarrassed that I rarely did it again! Yet here I was swearing at a doctor. Meanwhile he read through my notes and eventually sighed.

'Well,' he said. 'You've proved your point, you're not well. Now you can either sit and talk to me properly, or not. What's it going to be? We know you need help. We're here to help, but we can't help you with all this going on. I know you are not stupid. You are an intelligent woman. I want to talk and listen to you, but I would much rather you sat in one of these empty chairs and looked at me.'

This approach did work and slowly I moved and curled up in this big, uncomfortable chair. Maybe, had there been an inviting sofa and cushions there in the first place, I would have used them. Big chairs meant for the elderly were not ideal in such a room.

At last I did begin to talk to him about all the build-up to my admittance and my desperate need for sleep. He agreed and said he would write me up a prescription for some sleeping pills and stronger antidepressants. He said that they would not work immediately but we would have to see how I went on. I would be allowed home a little if I wanted to go but he suggested that I did need some time with them in hospital. By the end of the session I felt much better and he called in a lady who was to be my named nurse and we all confirmed the decisions that had been made. From there she took me to my bed, the first one in the ward, and once again I unpacked, in time for a look around before lunch.

The ward appeared to be like a small 'h' shape. The entrance to it at the top led down a corridor, with small rooms off it. This led onto the main hub of the ward behind a huge white door which was usually locked. This opened into the dining room with the kitchen, nurse's office and a small consultation room leading off it. It was all decorated for Christmas with a tree, lights and decorations. The dining area had about five round tables with chairs and also served as the visiting area. It always smelled of stale food. Just along from here was the lounge which looked like a nursing home with big, straight-backed chairs, a television and a couple of tables. On a couple of shelves were some jigsaw puzzles and battered games. There was a separate room between the main day areas for smokers. It was like a waiting room at a station – bare, yellow and smelly with a few old and tatty magazines strewn around. At either end of the main areas were the two bedrooms and bathrooms. Each patient had their own bed, wardrobe and bedside cabinet. There were no curtains dividing the beds. The furniture was used for privacy. I estimate each room had about ten beds in it. There was only one single bedroom.

I was aware that it was lunchtime by other patients making their way into the dining room and all other areas immediately becoming quiet. The food was served from a hatch into the kitchen, but initially a trolley was brought into the dining area with six big metal teapots and some bread and butter for each table. As I learnt later, some patients had laid the tables earlier and appeared to have their own places. I did not know where to sit so queued for my food, picked up a knife and fork and sat at a table

on my own. There seemed to be no staff around other than one who was assisting an elderly lady with her meal. I felt shy and scared. The food felt like lumps in my dry mouth. Luckily, from one table a friendly voice informed me that there was room on their table. I joined four other ladies who were to become my meal 'friends' for several weeks to come. Hardly anyone spoke other than to ask how much sugar to put in their tea. Three of my fellow diners were elderly and other than appearing to be a bit confused and slow, seemed fine to me (yet I probably did to them). The other lady was middle-aged, very gentle and quiet with piercing eyes, as if she were trying to tell you something that you could not understand.

Usually in hospital your relationship with other patients develops very quickly as you chat about your respective reasons for being there and discuss your family, job and life in general. In the early days in the ward, none of these topics seemed to arise. Conversation was based around mealtimes and the strength of the tea. I did not want to communicate and neither did anyone else it seemed. None of the staff seemed to want to chat either. I wanted to talk at times but no one was around to listen.

Nick arrived at some stage and told me about what had happened at home. He had not gone back into school due to my situation and with it being the last few days before Christmas his assistants would be managing the festivities for his class as necessary. Dominic had spent most of the time at my parents since I had become so ill. Claire had now joined the swelling numbers there and he was amused and cared for by a team of relative strangers other than my parents. Nick would collect him in between visits to me and take him home for a while.

During my first afternoon on the correct ward Nick also spoke to staff and everyone agreed that the initial suggestion of both Dominic and I being admitted to the Mother and Baby ward was not viable. I also started on my first tablets of the new medication. By teatime I felt a little happier as at least I knew where to sit and actually enjoyed my meal and cup of tea. At each mealtime a nurse would bring in the medication trolley and we would wait to be called up for our own. I felt myself getting excited at the prospect of walking up for mine but at the same time almost scared of others watching me. So few of us had eye contact with anyone on the way back to our place. It was amazing how quickly I felt swallowed into institutionalisation. By early evening visitors left and most people went through to the lounge area or smoking room. There was another drinks trolley at nine o'clock for patients. Visitors had to use a vending machine. The liveliest area did seem to be the smokers' room for both staff and patients. I almost felt I wanted to smoke to be part of it. Instead I sat with some of the elderly ladies in the big chairs watching television. I began to feel very restless and if I tried to relax my legs would jerk. One elderly lady caused the staff a great deal of work as she constantly shouted out, would complain loudly about everything and generally took up more attention

than the rest of us put together. She was put in the only single room quite early on for the night, but she still shouted spasmodically. I realised that it was getting to be bedtime for us all as the patients suddenly seemed to put on their nightclothes and assemble in the dining area again. Not wishing to be left out I did the same. The ritual was a bedtime drink and medication. As I held my cup my arm twitched and I spilt some – odd, I thought. Shortly we all wandered off to our respective beds but I felt far from sleepy.

Once again I found myself in a darkened room but could not settle at all. Also, I was beginning to feel very full and uncomfortable with my milk-laden breasts and no baby to release the pressure. I like to sleep on my front but with these hard ‘footballs’ it was impossible. Gradually the sound of snores, fidgeting and other bodily noises filtered through the darkness. I felt the start of a self-mutilation urge, so got up to find a member of staff. Maybe if I had another drink it would help. I wandered back towards the dining area but could find no one. Eventually one of the staff appeared. She was a large woman with short hair and masculine features. She was abrupt with me and sharply asked what was I doing out of bed. I explained that I could not settle and wondered if I could talk to someone and have a milky drink. In a nasty tone of voice she told me that there were no drinks available at this time of night and that the main kitchen only sent them a certain amount each evening and there was none left. She suggested I went back to bed again. Like a scared child I ran back to my bed and resisted the urge to hurt myself again but lay there twitching uncontrollably. Now what was wrong with me? I kept trying to imagine the previous night and how calm I had felt wrapped in a blanket. I had suffered at night for months and being confined to bed was torture. The night passed by bearably for me due to the commotion, several hours later, of the admission of an alcoholic whose children had found her passed out on the kitchen floor. Various staff and her family members seemed to spend ages talking in angry voices to her, saying they were fed up with the number of times ‘she had been in this place’ and that this time should be the last. It was sad that someone else’s illness helped me through a bad night.

I think I did manage a couple of hours’ sleep. After breakfast I had a pleasant surprise with a visit from our vicar. I was genuinely glad to see him and due to his position he was allowed into the lounge area. We sat and held hands as we talked and I found him a great comfort. It was to be the first of many visits to me and I appreciated his compassion and friendship at such a difficult time. Although I cannot remember specifically what we talked about, I know his very presence did calm me and gave me hope that one day I would be well again. That morning I also received a beautiful bouquet from the school staff. I remember feeling at bit upset when I asked a nurse for a vase. I arranged them but was stopped from putting them at my bedside. I was told that flowers stayed in the lounge for everyone to enjoy. Yet they were for me and I felt entitled to be selfish.

Later on I was upset with my sore, heavy breasts and asked a couple of staff for advice. All one heavily-busted woman commented was that I should be grateful that it would be short-lived as she was saddled with a big pair all the time! Luckily another lady was more sympathetic and managed to get me some painkillers which helped a little. Gradually the pressure did ease over the next week or so.

Nick visited in the afternoon and I gave him washing for home. We began 'Hanzak lists' for items between hospital and home and such aspects of domesticity formed part of the visiting routine. I told him about my limbs twitching and sore breasts but also that I did feel a bit better. That evening he brought my mother and Dominic briefly to see me. I really did not want to see them for some unknown reason and a few minutes was enough. Nick wrote in Dominic's diary that he was pleased to see me though. Months later I was pleased to see how Nick had continued the diary in my absence, noting at this point that Dom, as we now called him sometimes, had developed a funny laugh, especially at night. He also sucked his gums, made strange faces and was getting better at trying to sit up.

My second night on this ward was awful. Once again we were sent to bed and an eerie stillness grew around the ward. Where did the staff go at night? The twitching grew worse and worse. I did feel like I could sleep that night, but physically when I did relax my limbs would jerk violently. I became more and more distressed and no one seemed to visit the ward. I got up and wandered around the lounge area, trying to see if I could settle better after that. The same night nurse was on duty again and sent me back to bed. I told her the problem but she said to try to forget about it. I tried and tried to relax but presumably as the sleeping tablet took a little effect I was semi-sedated and got out of bed again, wandering with my twitching limbs. I was confused, dazed and very, very scared. I wandered like a drunk around the deserted rooms and eventually collided with a tall bookcase. I split my lip and banged the side of my face. I was aware of a crash and then a bright light going on. It was that same abrupt nurse again! I had knocked a potted plant off the bookcase and it was lying smashed and shattered all over the floor. The nurse angrily shouted at me, called me a troublemaker and said she had predicted that I would be a problem. The rest of the night I cowered under my covers like a naughty child, too terrified to move, apart from the spasmodic jerks. At the time I did not consider what effect her attitude had upon me, but with hindsight it was very damaging.

I was so relieved to see the day staff and hoped that the next night would be better. I told Nick about my terrible night when he came the next day. I saw him tell my 'named nurse' who apparently checked the notes and no mention had been made of it. I felt they both thought I was lying and yet I knew I was right. Fine, if they do not believe me, I thought, then I will just have to carry on myself. If they think the medi-

cation should make me sleep then I must be failing again, so tonight I will make it work for sure.

I had a surprise visit from Nick's friends that day who were en route to see relatives in Liverpool. As it was not true visiting time, they let me see them in the small consultation room. I vaguely remember wittering about many things to them. The wife of the couple said something which I interpreted to imply that she could not understand what was wrong with me, as I now had everything I wanted. I freaked out and yelled at her. I climbed onto her husband's lap, asking him for a hug and generally behaved very strangely. I was not well enough to see them.

That night another nurse found me curled up in a dark corner of the ward, sobbing silently, rocking and digging holes out of my fingers with my thumbnails. Every now and then I would mumble 'Too scared ... I'm trouble ... too scared'. She asked what I was doing and when I explained about the unbearable twitching but I was frightened to ask for help, she did at least hug me, put me back into bed and reassured me that it must be the new medication which was not suiting me. Immediately I felt better knowing that there was a reason for it. I had begun to feel that I was doing it myself subconsciously. Maybe it was another part of my lunacy. To be believed, given an explanation and reassured was a great help and I was able to settle better. She even put some plasters on my bleeding fingers.

The following day was Christmas Eve and doctors were in short supply. By lunchtime I was very worried that my medication was not changed and it took Nick's demands before a locum doctor was asked to take action. Within hours the twitching had eased to a bearable level. The ward had become very quiet as all patients, where possible, had gone home for Christmas and staffing levels had been reduced. By Nick's second visit that day I was much better. He said he had left Dominic at his mother's and suggested, after a chat with the staff, that I should go out for a visit there for half an hour. Hesitantly I did so. I had only been in hospital a few days but already the 'outside world' seemed to be a huge challenge. I was able to slip into 'I'm fine' mode at my mother-in-law's, but after a drink wanted to go back to the ward. It felt surrealistic. I did not know who or what I was at this stage. I felt secure back on the ward and felt no emotion at seeing Dominic leave. I always felt sorry to see Nick go.

It was sad that on Dominic's first Christmas morning he was without his parents. Although his grandparents and relatives were doing well with him, physically he looked pathetic on Christmas Day photographs. His face had big red patches of eczema that had flared up and he looked quite lost and bewildered. Meanwhile I woke up on the ward with no excitement whatsoever. Normally I am still a big kid about everything associated with the season – not this year. However, Nick collected me and we went to his mother's for lunch. All the photographs of that visit mainly show Nick, Granny H and Dominic. I opted out and just took them. The most effective

present was a singing and dancing pig which fascinated Dominic, until it made him cry! He received many presents from the family and our friends. All I had got for him was a cassette player we had bought at Rutland Water, in the summer. Lunch passed off well and we decided to call at our house prior to going to my parents'. It was my first visit home. As Dominic needed changing, I offered to do it and took him up to his room. He began to cry. I took his nappy off. He cried. I wiped him. He cried. I put a clean nappy on. He cried. I put on his trousers. He cried. I picked him up. He cried. I shook him. He cried. I shook and shook him. He cried. Luckily Nick came in and grabbed him from me, asking, 'What are you doing?'

Numbly, I replied I was shaking 'that noisy bag of bones to shut it up'. I felt nothing but the desire to stop that noise. That noise which had disturbed me for so long. That noise which had ruined me.

From there Nick debated if he should take me straight back to hospital. I said I would be fine if the noise did not start again. So we had a buffet meal at my parents' house with my side of the family. I felt like a stranger, as if I were not there. I was just watching a film, detached and cold. I smiled for photographs and opened presents. Physically I was there but mentally I was nowhere, just a shadow of my former self. Back at the hospital I wandered happily to my bed and Nick had to report on my behaviour during the day. The incident of me shaking Dominic led to him being placed on the 'at risk' register. Happy Christmas!

So by the end of Dominic's eighth month he had been christened, had his first Christmas, met Father Christmas for the first time and been placed on the 'at risk' register by social services! His typical day was spent with his African cousins, at Christmas parties and using his baby walker and bouncer. He weighed 20 lb 9 oz and was 72 cm long. His bedtime was varied; his sleep and daily pattern non-existent but he could sit up unaided. He had been having feeds from his mother three times a day but now was totally on formula milk with some solids, especially white chocolate fingers. He could make clicking noises with his tongue and liked playing with crinkly paper. Yet the biggest event was that he had been separated from his mother, now in a hospital for the mentally ill. What a month!