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THE UNEXPECTED HERO

My first moments in the VA neuropsychiatric hospital's homicidal/suicidal unit were filled with anxiety. I had joined the "friendly visitor" program offered by the Red Cross, expecting a conventional hospital assignment. Instead, I got a mental institution. In my mind's eye, an asylum was a grim, dark, dangerous place harboring unspeakable horrors and human hopelessness. Much of my anxiety was fueled by my early childhood memories of the Rochester State Hospital, formerly the Monroe County Insane Asylum, located one block away from my home. Mental images of shouting, screaming patients crammed together like caged animals in screened porches, lingered in my mind. Adding to my fears, was the warning I received from the other volunteers: "keep your back to the wall while on the ward". However, after a few visits to the unit, my fears dissipated. These men were not like the raving inmates that I remembered from my childhood. For the most part they were quiet and well behaved. In my inexperience, the place seemed relatively "safe", and one where, with little risk, I could reach out to the *only patient* who was seriously delusional and alone, but for his demons.

On my weekly visits I tried engaging him in conversation. Usually, he responded with grunts and the look of someone peering into another world. But not too long after I started visiting the ward, I caught

a glimpse of his violent side. For no apparent reason, he picked up a very heavy, steel framed, institutional type lounge chair, raised it above his head, and then slammed it to the floor. The behavior revealed a man who, during his manic modes, was totally unpredictable, capable of incredible strength – and dangerous! In my naiveté I discounted the significance of this act.

As time went on, he seemed to change, and become more amenable to social contact. I thought I was making progress. Then, during one of my visits, he shocked me! I had brought some home-baked cookies with me to share with the patients. I offered him one. Suddenly, his eyes glazed over. Then, his face twisted into a demonic mask. His body became rigid. He looked like a wild animal getting ready to strike. We were only a few inches apart. I was terrified and froze on the spot! Just when he seemed ready to spring, a man suddenly appeared out of nowhere and wedged himself between the two of us in a gentle but firm way. As he did so, he kept saying quietly and calmly “It’s OK doc, take it easy, you’re OK doc”. Gradually, my would-be aggressor relaxed and walked away. Who was my rescuer?

In the early sixties, when this incident occurred, the country was wracked by extreme racial violence. It was the era of the Watts riots and fires in Los Angeles. The relationship between Blacks and Whites was at its lowest ebb. Yet, during this racially charged period, it was a *black*, psychiatric patient who stepped between me, a *white* woman, and a deranged, *white*, former physician, and took successful control of the situation. What irony!

Let’s look at the unexpected elements in this incident? At the time of the encounter, the unit was filled with white patients, white male attendants, three white, female Red Cross volunteers and one, elderly white male volunteer. I wasn’t even aware of a black man on the ward. Yet, who stepped up to the plate? The invisible black guy! At a time when our society was enveloped in acute racial bitterness, he made a **deliberate choice** to help someone who was racially on the “other side”!

But that wasn’t the only surprising thing! He was a psychiatric patient! Given my previous, childhood impressions of the mentally ill – people who were confused and out of touch with reality - he was the last person that I would have expected to instantaneously evaluate the situation and take immediate action!

Lessons learned? Don’t judge a book by its cover!!

Oh, by the way, what was my rescuer's name? I don't know! He vanished like a shadow into the sea of anonymous mortals surrounding me!