

I Remember Jones

by Riah Fagan Cox (1892-1977)
c. 1950

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One night several years ago I quite suddenly and completely lost my mind. It happened to me, as I found out later from my family, in a telephone booth where I was trying frantically and incoherently to reach a friend in a distant city to tell her that her son was A.W.O.L in California. They took me to a private sanitarium where for three months I received gentle care, many sedatives and some mild electric shock treatments, but grew steadily worse. It was a tragic time for my family when finally there was nothing to do but commit me to a state hospital for the mentally ill. There, one fine morning about a year later, I awoke from the hideous nightmare, about to begin a long, hard struggle back to reality. Thanks to the skill of an overworked staff of doctors and nurses, —and a kind Providence, I recovered. The fact that the living conditions at the hospital were just barely endurable and that comfort was non-existent was factors of tremendous importance. And so it seems to me now that the fact I lost my mind is of minor significance compared to the way I regained it.

A hospital attendant, whom I shall call Jones, completely dominated my first lucid moments on that morning when I regained consciousness. She was standing by my bed, holding a breakfast tray (a circumstance in itself enough to create a first good impression, for my hunger was something I can't bear to think about, even now). She was a tall, handsome woman, with her black hair set in shining waves, with nice gray eyes and a healthy, clear complexion. Then I noticed the expression in her eyes, —it was the extreme distaste with which one views a thoroughly repulsive object.

"I wouldn't give a nickel for your chances," she commented casually as she placed the tray on my chest. Bewildered and wondering what had become of Brinson, my nurse in the pleasant former sanitarium where I thought I had gone to sleep, I asked for my orange juice.

"Who and where do you think you are?" she replied, and left. Her utter lack of concern for my health and comfort aroused intense indignation, a state of mind, which saved me from the panic my strange surroundings would have otherwise induced. For I was strapped down, in a narrow, hard bed in an ugly room with barred windows. From the corridor came eerie sounds. Someone was imploring God to send a doctor quick or let her die. Another voice was crooning, Flow Gently, Sweet Afton.

"Can it be that they think I am out of my mind?" I thought incredulously. Just then a sad, little woman thrust her head in my door and said plaintively, "There is something radically wrong here."

"There certainly is," I replied, "please tell me where I am." But she disappeared without a word and another one, just as strange, peered in, stared and vanished. Then I realized where I was. There could be no doubt about it, but why? For how long? Where was my family and how could they have abandoned me to this horror? Uncertainty filled those first dreadful days and no one could tell me anything, least of all Jones, who, although she brought me trays regularly, treated me with utmost scorn, refusing to talk to

me or to loosen the strap which held me down most uncomfortably. It infuriated me that she thought I was crazy, but I was most afraid to go to sleep for fear that she was right. I marveled at the courage of people who dared casually to lose consciousness in sleep.

There was a slim ray of hope, however. The doctor, when he came in, would surely see at once how sane I was. In the meantime, a terrific urgency possessed me. I must gain strength physically to prove how wrong Jones was in regarding my chances of survival so lightly. Consequently I concentrated on showing rapid and sure improvement every time the doctor came, and did not have time or energy to feel sorry for myself. Soon I was allowed to sit up a little while every day and the doctor admitted I was making amazing progress, although he seemed unimpressed by my sanity.

The several weeks that it took for me to learn to walk again were 'hard times,' for Jones seemed devoted to making me miserable and the slightest provocation was enough to bring quick and unduly severe punishment, or so it seemed then. As soon as I could slowly creep along the corridors, I discovered patients much more unfortunate than I and took pleasure in giving them cookies and oranges with which my family kept me supplied. Vivien, who lived next door, was particularly in need of vitamins and was the most frequent recipient of gifts. Jones found out about it, of course.

"So you think you're Lady Bountiful, giving away food to the patients," she raged. You're responsible for Vivien's relapse and her throwing her sheets out of the window. You better be careful or you'll go back to "pack!" The punishment was being confined to my room for several days and seemed pure persecution, but I'm sure that my anger did wonders in hastening my mobility so that I could better keep out of Jones's way.

That word "pack" stirred vague memories and I began to piece together from the conversation of patients, what had happened during the months before I was conscious. Martha, who was one of the most trusted patients and was very friendly, cleared up for me the meaning of 'pack'. She also told me that I had arrived at the hospital in very bad shape indeed and that Jones had had considerable to do with my surviving. "It sure is a wonder you made it," she concluded, "Not many get out of there except in the 'dead' wagon!"

Obviously it was dangerous not to show definite and steady improvement in that place, so I redoubled my efforts to walk and 'cooperate', as the attendants called good behavior. I even tried to be friendly with Jones, buoyed up by the revelation that she was not intent on my liquidation; but my best efforts failed miserably. When she told the doctor one day that I was wearing my satin bed jacket just to impress him, I suddenly knew that it would not be long until I would be well enough to leave that dreary place. Jones was simply too much to bear!

Not long after that I was allowed to see my family. It was heartwarming to see their faith, too, that I would be well some day. And they brought me such wonderful food!

"You are going to have orange juice delivered every morning now", my husband said as he was leaving.

"But Jones won't like that!" And I started to explain, but the supervisor led him out before I could tell him about Jones.

From that point on, it was a matter of getting through days until the next visit. The tedium was somewhat lightened by my interest in seeing what indignities Jones

could think up when she came on her daily rounds. I was right about the orange juice; she gave it to me, but resentfully.

"Here, you." she said, "You don't need this half an much as some of the other 'ladies'." The custom of calling the patients 'ladies' had bothered me and I decided to ask why, even at the risk of incurring further scorn.

"Why don't you call us simply women?" I asked. She was apparently stuck for an answer, for she did not reply and I assumed the term had "been adopted by the hospital staff to inspire better manners in the 'ladies.' It depressed me, though, and always seemed an unnecessary cruel bit of conscious humor,—as if the attendants, symbolic of a superior outer world, were slyly making fun of the patients.

Invulnerable to depression for very long, however, since my going home was a certainty, in my mind at least, I began to be interested in the small excitements of hospital routine. They began at dawn when dozens of shadowy figures would scurry past my door bound for the kitchen and breakfast trays. Considering that the trays always held the same thing—bacon gravy, charred toast and oatmeal, I often wondered why they hurried so to get them. Then later in the morning came electric shock treatments, in the big room at the end of the corridor. I had graduated from that torture, but dreaded to see others trying to hide to avoid it. At dusk Goldie, a beautifully built Amazon of a woman, always came in to move my furniture out into the hall. She was kind and cheerful and very friendly, so I asked her one evening why there must be all that shoving of furniture back and forth, "Don't you know, dearie, that they don't trust you?" she replied.

"But what could I do with a table and a chair?"

"You tell me," she shrugged; but it's a bitter pill, isn't it?" I was horrified to find out later that Goldie, the most popular of all the patients allowed to do chores around the hospital, had tried to commit suicide every time she had been home on furlough.

Several times a week there was a terrific fuss about scrubbing the floors. I could sense the excitement in the air even before the privileged patients began rushing through the corridors, armed with brooms and mops. Soon a wave of soapy water would sweep around the corner of my room and swish under the bed while several of the ladies frantically kept it on its mad career. Scrubbing day always left such a terrible smell of wet straw and formaldehyde in my room that my longing for a shampoo increased to the point of desperation. And so a plot was born, Martha promised to help me wash my hair the first time Jones was off duty. The plan worked beautifully and I reveled in the luxury of clean hair and a beautiful, new bond of friendship with Martha—until Jones found out and I was punished by having my room declared out of bounds to all patients. No one dared speak to me and I knew how dull social ostracism could be.

My feud with Jones reached a new high soon after the episode of the shampoo. It had never occurred to me that my letters might be censored. Not only was I in grave error but, due to the absence of the doctor and the supervisor, Jones censored one particularly damning document in which I had dwelt at length upon her less lovely traits and her qualifications as the outstanding sadist of all time.

"What do you mean calling me names I don't even know the meaning of—especially when I helped save your life?" she demanded in a rage. The door slammed and locked and I was in solitary confinement. The two days until the doctor came and rescinded her orders seemed an eternity. The only person I saw was Jones and the gleam in her eye boded no good for me.

At last the time came when I was entrusted with duties. With what relief I made beds, carried trays and swept floors: Moreover, these activities gave me the opportunity of getting acquainted with more of those shadowy figures, seen before only on scrubbing days. Many of them, I discovered had once been useful, intelligent citizens whose only sin, apparently, was that life had been too much for them. Their obsessions were various and tragic,—doubly tragic because in every case an ordinary frustration had, through lack of psychological help, grown into a full-blown neurosis, Gladys' particular trouble had been a passionate hatred of housekeeping, which grew into such proportions that she had not been home for years. Mrs. M had been so furious because her husband refused to pay for her false teeth, that she, likewise, had lost all emotional stability. Mrs. S seemed all right most of the time but flew into a rage whenever she even thought of her daughter-in-law. Hattie had a touch of kleptomania and her frantic redistribution of property kept everyone's small store of possessions in a fluid state. Mildred loved clothes to distraction; at least her compulsion to 'dress up' indicated some such complex. Her costumes so exceeded the bounds of moderation—either too much clothing or practically none at all—that I wondered if her trouble might be a split personality. She was, perhaps, more frustrated than any of the others; for she told me that what she really wanted to do was to climb mountains.

As the weeks slipped by, Jones repeatedly crushed my hopes of going home by giving reports to the doctor, which were nothing short of alarming. I did not deserve to go home, she said; and anyway, everything I said was 'queer'. She used, as one example, a comment I had made concerning Vivien, who suffered the delusion that she had once been Mrs. Astor. I had said that she reminded me of Don Marquis' character, Mehitabel,* who was sure she had once been Cleopatra—a perfectly logical comparison, it seemed to me; but to Jones, it was ample proof that I was still out of my mind. Even in postponing my release, Jones did me a service, however; for those extra weeks I waited to go home taught me thoroughly the lesson of humility and gave me time to accept an honest attitude toward my illness.

It was while Jones was on vacation that I had to pass an important test—that of assisting while a very ill patient was given an electric shock treatment. Full realization of my own humiliating helplessness in the past, struck me, as with three other patients I knelt on the floor to hold her while the doctor adjusted the electrodes on her temples. The gag was put in her mouth and the current turned on. Mercifully she lost consciousness instantly and we moved her, bundled in a blanket, to a corner of the big room and left her lying on the floor. I remembered awakening in a similarly ignoble position, the awful nausea, and the utter desolation of having to get back to my room somehow.

The final test came soon after I had helped with the shock treatment. I was called into the doctor's office and asked a few simple questions such as, who was George Washington, and what to do in case of fire. Apparently I was able to cope with the crises of a normal life if I could remain emotionally undisturbed in case of fire riot, and was mindful of the Father of my country. Anyway, the verdict was immediate and dazzling—I could go home the next day, not just on furlough, but for good!

To try to recapture in words the happiness of Home and being a part of my family once more would destroy my emotional calm, even now, years later. Every contentment, comfort, and pleasure was intensified a hundredfold because the years spent in the

hospital, though outwardly lost, had somehow increased my capacity for gratitude. I was more aware of the simple enjoyments of living—the quiet of home, the sound of friendly voices, the wonder of freedom of going about casually, unwatched; the adventure of being outdoors alone. The electric shock treatments had left me with huge blackouts of memory, but I could not mourn lost remembrance of the past when discovering things a new held such enchantment. Even the minor blessings of having old clothes and favorite books seem new and unexplored were no small wonders.

At first I thought that Jones belonged in the category of memories well lost, and regretted that was not a part of my life dimmed by amnesia. But time has forced me to recognize her as one of my major blessings. Whether her inspired treatment of me was by accident or by design, I'll never know; but her harshness, her tough efficiency and thorny humor touched off some secret source of strength in me, and I am thankful that a kind fate substituted her for the gentle Brinson.

*From Archy and Mehitabel