

Florid Psychosis

What a wonderfully poetic and elastic phrase. What it means is anything from a rabid axe-wielding maniac, to a pathetic person possessed by a ridiculous delusion. Gabriel was the latter case. He used to visit the reception desk in the Garvan Institute regularly, and politely ask for me, his father. The girls on the desk got used to him, even though he turned up in a very strange variety of outfits and personalities. His favourite for a long while was ‘Lucinda’, a ten year-old girl wearing a tiger stripe mini-skirt and high-heeled sandals – which didn’t go at all well with his scruffy full beard, bald head and hairy legs. The reception desk girls would phone me, and I would go down and have a chat. He knew I would never give him money, because he knew that I knew he would only spend it on street drugs. So we would go outside and walk up to the little supermarket in Victoria Street to buy whatever he wanted in groceries and cigarettes. Then we would hug outside, and he would go back with his groceries to Heidi’s flat, quite happily. There was nothing I could do, and nothing hospitals or doctors could do. In order to be ‘treated’ against his will, he had to be ‘sectioned’, and in order to be sectioned, a doctor had to declare that he was “in danger of harming

himself or others”, or “in danger of damaging his reputation”. And no doctor would do this because there were no psychiatric hospital beds or rooms available.

Well, at least he wasn't as bad as Dawn's brother. Dawn's brother John decided that his mother was to blame for everything, and exhibited such threatening behaviour towards her that she locked him out of the house. The house was in the rural town of Young in central NSW. She was forced to phone the police when he tried to burn down the front door. He was arrested and put in the local gaol, but he escaped from there and was hunted by cops and dogs. After three days a junior constable answered an emergency call from a farmer who had come home to find a stranger eating in his kitchen. The constable arrived outside and shouted to the intruder to come out with his hands up. John came outside but he was eating a sandwich and didn't raise his hands – so the constable shot him. The bullet hit his neck, narrowly missing the jugular. The constable phoned for help and they took John to the local hospital. The cops tried to cover up the constable's mistake by having John declared dangerous and sending him to Long Bay gaol – a top security prison in South Sydney. The family tried to get him transferred back to a psychiatric hospital, and also tried to lodge a complaint about the shooting. No hope. The cops held him in Long Bay for six months before releasing him back to the care of his mother. I wrote an article in my HeadLines newsletter about 40 per cent of the NSW prison inmates having a diagnosed mental illness. That didn't achieve anything, either.

Years passed. The Garvan Institute is just over the road from St Vincent's Hospital and its nearby psychiatric wing, Caritas, so I became the go-to guy for dealing with wandering psychos and junkies who sometimes wandered into the Garvan's reception area. Outside these encounters, there were crises with Gabriel involving drug overdoses – one of which resulted in stroke and a three-month period with hemiplegia – arrests for various offences, 3-day incarcerations in the revolving-door psyche hospital, and the whole grandson Jack fostering drama. But it's true that we can get used to anything: I remembered my past life as if it was someone else's; some naive chump's who knew nothing about reality. I became adept at cutting off threads of thought that led to feelings of grief, disappointment and betrayal, and expert at nurturing other threads that led to anger and determination. Anger was good, was useful. It was the fuel I burned in my job of drumming up support for more research.

My research institute, NISAD, developed steadily, with occasional hiccups, the worst of which was when a new scientific director employed a completely unsuitable female CEO who wasted \$80,000 on crackpot fund raising campaigns which I *knew* would fail. She ignored all that myself and the Research Coordinator said in opposition, and filled the office with meaningless 'corporate speak', like a one-woman motivation seminar. The Board saw sense in the end, and sacked her and the scientific director – all very politely, of course.

Dawn and I became shining exemplars of the successful separate domicile relationship. Truly, it solves

all marital frictions if the partners simply live apart and get together on weekends. We phoned each other for a chat most evenings, and looked forward to our Saturday nights together. We both agreed that it was wonderful to come home every night to an empty home, to be sole rulers of our domains. She would do her glass bead work with her blow torch in the kitchen, or talk to her mother and sisters for hours on the phone (a ritual I found annoying), and I would potter about undisturbed in my studio, or use the remote to flick between a number of simultaneous TV shows (a trait which Dawn found *very* annoying). And we had our bathrooms and kitchens entirely to ourselves! We wondered why the world did not know about 'sympatico separation', this perfect way of life.

Everything was as much under control as it could be under the circumstances. And then the circumstances changed. I received a phone call from a psychiatrist at the Cumberland Psychiatric Hospital in Western Sydney advising me that my son Gabriel had been admitted to their locked ward. I was told that he had been arrested in a shopping centre in Sutherland, a suburb about 50 kilometres south of central Sydney. The shop keepers at the centre had dialled the emergency number because Gabriel had been seen talking to toddlers in pushchairs. What had alarmed them was that Gabriel had been dressed in a short pink woman's slip, with very dirty bare feet, a full beard, and using a golf club as a walking stick. The Sutherland police had not taken him to Caritas because *they did not know who he was!* They drove him straight to their own local hospital, the biggest psychiatric hospital

in New South Wales, the Cumberland, near Parramatta, Western Sydney.

I still don't know how or why Gabriel got down to Sutherland, but blessed the day he did. Because he was arrested there, he automatically came under the responsibility of the Cumberland's Western Sydney health area. If I had tried to get him into the Cumberland he would have been refused because he lived in Paddington, the East Sydney health area. His arrest and admission into a locked ward was the best news about him I had ever received. The Cumberland, unlike Caritas, was not a revolving door, but a proper psyche hospital with a proper system of treatment. Gabriel remained under the supervision of the Cumberland and its affiliated organisations for seven years. He started in the locked ward, graduated to the open ward, and from there to the rehabilitation system, and from there to outside accommodation, a disability pension, and a job in a protected factory. He is now completely independent, living happily in a rented house with two other 'recovered' schizophrenia patients. His body has suffered some damage from his 15 years of psychosis, but from his gentle manner and friendly speech you would never guess that he had ever been floridly psychotic.

But the moving finger had not got all the way there, yet. In this text it is still writing that the psychiatrist on the phone told me how important family support was in these cases, and that I should visit him at the Cumberland as often as I could.

It was obviously time I bought a new car. Ever since reluctantly parting with my beloved POTATO car,