Bedlam

Eddie McNally*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©1996 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
The Saturday after my dad first shows up, Walter makes his break for the woods, and vanishes.

Walter's run sets the rest of the patient population off. I sound the alarm myself, and right away the bells generally get most of the less medicated patients up and shouting, or crying. After the doctors had settled them down one way or another, the staff sent after Walter start trickling back to the Farm without nothing but shrugs. The doctors meet in the main administrative office behind the desk at the front doors, I guess to figure out what to do now. A group of us staff wait for them right there in the lobby, so the doctors start their talk in the office real quiet, but it gets loud enough for everybody to hear pretty quick.

"Homicidal? For the love of God, Josh, can you tell me just why the hell you had Walter in the general population? Could you explain that to me?"

Dr. Palumbo tears into Dr. Cester-pronounced-Chester for a good couple of minutes; his voice comes booming through the door and must be thundering in that little office. Dr. Cester's answers are quieter and higher pitched, and Dr. Palumbo keeps cutting him off anyway. In the lobby the staff sort of just glances around, but not at each other. Dr. Palumbo is usually a nice enough man if you stay on his good side, but he can come down very hard sometimes, like back in '89 when nurse June got killed by Sid, one of the Psychotics. There were all kinds of reporters all over the Farm for about two weeks, and Dr. Palumbo was real nice and serious for all the cameras but inside he was screaming all the time at everybody, and he even fired Dan Waddamaker, one of the observers, who wasn't doing anything but reading an Atlanta newspaper in the lounge that had the headline, "HORROR AT WILLOW FARM: The Bedlam of the South."

"Goddam it, Josh! I don't want to hear nothing about Ritalin reactions! If you even suspected Walter might be a flight risk, let alone displaying HT's, you should have put him in the East Wing!"

Something crashes against the wall in there, and the staff in the lobby cringes.

"You remember the East Wing, don't you, Josh? You painted it that attractive shade of pink? You fucking-surfer-dolt-shithead!"

After another five minutes of one-sided shouting the door of the office busts open and the staff waiting in the lobby all jump and try to
look like we weren't listening. Dr. Palumbo stomps out and comes to a stop in front of the desk; he narrows his eyes behind his silver-rimmed glasses and glares around at everybody. He's not a big guy but he carries himself like he's seven foot tall. Dr. Wallace comes out behind him with her hands in her lab coat pockets and a minty smelling cigarette in her mouth. She stands off behind Dr. Palumbo, leans against the wall, and tries to look like she's not enjoying this. Dr. Cester is still sitting in a chair in the office, with his head in his hands. The desk in front of him is littered with empty syringes, and he looks sort of like he's trying to hide from them, or just from everything.

“Okay people, listen up,” Dr. Palumbo says to us in a hiss that sounds almost like the hisses the roaches in his office make. You can't hear his N'Orleans accent hardly at all. “We have a patient who may or may not be experiencing a homicidal episode loose in the woods, and he is apparently armed with one big mother Louisville Slugger of a flashlight.”

Everybody just looks at Dr. Palumbo real serious like, except Dr. Wallace behind him who turns her face towards the wall and bites a knuckle.

Dr. Palumbo starts giving everybody partners and assignments, areas of the woods and grounds we are to search. He sends most all the staff out, calls up those who aren't on shift, and soon there are a good forty people searching the grounds of Willow Farm with flashlights of our own as the sun goes down.

We don't find a blessed thing.

Like I said, it was the Saturday before that my Dad showed up. I got off from work at Willow Farm and went home like usual, and in the space in front of my trailer there's this new car I never saw before. It's a big nice thing, and a deep dark blue, but it's got a lot of road dust on it and the day's not real light out yet, so the car looks sort of bruise-colored: Like when a banger gets their helmet off when you're not watching and smashes their head into a post. The car's plates are out-of-state too, they read Connecticut, so I figure somebody has family visiting, maybe Ms. Forester who's trailer is just left of mine, so I park the truck a little further down and walk back.

My Dad's sitting on my little porch, though I don't know that's who he is yet. All I know is that he's a real thin guy and not too tall
when he stands up. His hair's brown but grey back along the sides, and
he's wearing glasses like Dr. Palumbo's at the Farm - fragile looking
with little round lenses - only this guy's have gold frames. I don't know
him so I wait for him to say something, and I stay back a ways from the
porch on the sidewalk through the lawn. See, I'm a big guy myself and
when I'm standing close to somebody, like say in line at the Winn Dixie
in town, I guess I kind of crowd them without meaning to. So I stay
back from the guy with the gold rimmed glasses, but he looks nervous
anyway.

"J-james?" he says, which is my name though everybody calls me
Jim, or Jimbo, except for Bobby Lee, the Schizo at Willow Fram who
calls me either, “General Pete” or his “Old War Horse.”

“Yes sir,” I say.

The guy is at the end of my little porch now so we're standing
pretty near eye to eye. Even though his clothes are nice - beige slacks
and brown loafer shoes and a blue shirt - he's got a sort of rumpled and
uncared for look about him. He studies my face real close like he's
trying to read something written too small. “James Braithwaite?" he
asks. I nod. I think maybe I should tell him that people call me Jim,
or something, just to be friendly and maybe relax him.

He steps off the porch so now he's looking up at me. He licks his
lips real quick with a little dart of pink and he holds out a hand. I can
smell smoke on his clothes, cigarette smoke. “I'm Doctor Leslie
Vorhees.”

I shake his hand and he just keeps looking at me. “Do you know
who I am?”

“Sure,” I say, “Mom told me lots of times. You're my Dad.”

“That's right,” he says, and he just keeps on shaking my hand. He
doesn't seem to be going to say anything else, so I tell him that people
call me Jim.

Growing up wasn't the easiest thing I ever did. I don't mean that I
remember it as being really hard, but then again I only grew up the
once so I don't have anything to compare it to.

I guess it was a big deal that my Mom wasn't married; she had to
leave her family in Spartanburg, South Carolina, and go live with her
Aunt Emma in Tuxedo, Georgia. Mom told me she tried to write Leslie
Vorhees, my Dad, but he never wrote back. So I grew up with my Mom
on the little bit that was left of my Great Aunt Emma's place after she
died when I was six.
I went to school in Tuxedo for a while, and there most of the kids gave me trouble on account of I didn't have a Dad. I don't know how they found out about that - Mom told people he was just dead, but the kids at school seemed to know different. I never had what you'd call a friend. The kids at least stopped giving me trouble when I had my big growth spurt and shot up to six-foot-seven. Everybody left me be after that.

My Mom took sick so I left school during the eighth grade and got work at a peanut farm, where I could tote a good amount due to my size. When Mom's doctor bills started getting bigger I also got part-time work as a night watchman out at Willow Farm, and after Mom died I quit the peanut job and just worked at the Farm full time. I think Mom had wanted me to go back to school, but I was eighteen by then and it seemed sort of old to start over the eighth grade. Besides, there was a staff job out at Willow Farm that opened up and paid pretty good. I had never been very smart in school anyway. I think I only passed grades when I was little because the teachers felt sorry for me, and once I was big I think they passed me because they were scared. Even though I never got in fights like a lot of kids, the teachers would sometimes look at me out of the corners of their eyes like they thought I might, even though I tried to stay sort of hunched down and out of people's ways. So I never did go back to school, and after I sold what was left of Aunt Emma's place I moved to the trailer park out near Willow Farm. And I guess that's where I'll end up.

My Dad's a doctor, but not like Dr. Palumbo, or Dr. Wallace, or Dr. Cester-pronounced-Chester, or any of them out at Willow Farm. He tells me he is a professor, and he works at a college instead of a treatment facility.

"Mom never said that you were a professor," I tell him. We're in my trailer now. I asked him in because it seemed like that's the thing to do, and outside he was just standing there like he didn't have anywhere else he had to be.

"Well I wasn't then, of course," Dad tells me with a little smile that looks embarrassed and goes away real fast anyhow. "I was only twenty, you know."

I nod. We're standing in the little kitchenette area and my Dad's looking around at the cabinets, and the floor, and the blue curtains with the ducks on them, and pretty much everything but me. I guess he's
uncomfortable with the whole thing and there should be something that I should do about it, but I'm not sure what.

“So...” Dad takes a breath like he's going to say something but it just trails off, and he licks his lips some more, like maybe they're dry.

“Do you want something to drink?” I ask him.

His eyes snap back up to me and he nods too quick. He smells fairly strong of some kind of after-shave but he's got a couple days of salty stubble so I don’t think he actually has shaved in a while. From a little sour whiff I get through the after-shave every so often I don't know that he's showered for a bit either, and it has been hot this week.

“That would be fantastic, actually,” he nods real eager. I step over to the fridge and open her up.

“I've got some orange juice,” I say, “or milk, or some Dr. Pepper.”

“Oh,” my Dad says. “Nothing stronger?”

I shake my head. Dad takes a juice glass half full of Dr. Pepper from me and then goes back out to his car. He comes in with a suitcase - a nice leather duffel sort of thing with lots of straps and buckles - and takes a silver hip flask out of the side pocket. He leaves the bag standing there on the floor in the living room area. He pours out of the flask into his Dr. Pepper and sets it on the table. We both sit down, and Dad starts talking, sipping along. While he's explaining to me about his "sabbatical" he takes a wide pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket. It's a different sort of pack than I'm used to seeing, longer and flatter than what the smokers at the Farm carry, and sort of a fancy reddish-purple color. The pack reads “Dunhills.” When Dad lights one up with a half-gone book of matches from a gas station, though, it smells the same as everybody else's.

Dad keeps talking. He's telling me that Mom had written him once before I was born but because he was what he calls, "In my 'Wandering the Earth' period," he didn't get the letter until after. He keeps sipping and smoking real quick while he's telling me this and I keep looking at the ash that's getting pretty long on the end of his Dunhill while it zips around over my table top (he waves his arms a lot while he's talking). I don't want to interrupt him but I start to ease up from my chair towards the cabinet where I've got a clean butter dish, which I figure would do for an ash tray because I don't have a real one. Soon as I start to move, though, Dad jerks and slides back in his chair and the ash falls off and hits the table top. It holds together and just lies there looking ugly and sad, like in spring when there's an early
morning rain that blows off before noon and worms will get stuck out on the sidewalk and fry up into brittle little brown lines.

“Look, you’ve every reason to be angry with me!” my Dad says real loud and almost panicky, holding his hands up in front of him. They’re shaking, and the smoke from his cigarette jiggles in the air as it rises. “I realize that I have been absolutely no kind of father to you for thirty years, and I’m here to apologize, deeply, honestly, to you for that!”

I quit moving when Dad jumped so as not to spook him any more. I speak real slow and soft, like when you’re trying to soothe one of the psychopaths at Willow Farm once something wrong has happened. They tend to excite real easy.

“I was only reaching for a butter dish, so as you could use it as an ash tray,” I say.

Dad looks at me, then glances at his cigarette as if he just now realized he was smoking it. “Oh,” he says, then looks at the grey ash worm on the table top. He reaches out and brushes at it, and it breaks apart and leaves a black smear across the yellowed wood.

My Dad moves into the trailer with me. We don’t make a big deal of it or anything, actually I don’t know right away that he has moved in, his dropping his duffel bag in the living room was pretty much it. After a couple days, though, I sort of figure out that he’s not leaving.

I don’t see him much for those days as I am working long shifts at Willow Farm this week. When I’m leaving for work the day after he shows up and moves in, Sunday, he asks me about work.

“It’s not actually a farm,” I tell him, “It’s just called Willow Farm on account of it used to be a farm, and down by the crick on the property there is still a stand of willow trees.”

We are eating breakfast. I made a big pile of scrambled eggs. We are drinking orange juice though Dad has added to his out of another flask from his bag. He seems to have a number of them in there.

“So what is it then?” Dad asks. He holds his drink with one hand and the other switches between his fork and a cigarette he leaves sit on the ashy butter dish. “A spa of some sort?”

“It’s a treatment facility,” I say. My eggs don’t taste very good with smoke in my nose.

“You mean like an asylum?” my Dad asks, looking surprised.

“The doctors don’t like to call it that,” I say. My Dad does something strange then: He laughs. He laughs to himself, shakes his head,
and finishes his drink with a swallow. He starts making himself another one right away, pouring clear liquid from his flask on the table and adding just a bit of orange juice that hardly changes the color.

“How perfectly Tennessee Williams!” Dad says, still shaking his head and stirring his drink with a pinkie finger. Where a wedding ring would be on that hand, there’s an angry red band of skin. I want to mention to my Dad that we’re a good piece south of Tennessee, in Georgia, but I’m not sure if that’s what he’s talking about.

“So how long have you worked there?” Dad asks, smacking his lips over his first sip of his new drink and still looking pleased. He seems to be a pretty happy guy.

“A bit longer than twelve years,” I say, “since just before Mom died.”

He stops smiling then and glances at me a little spooked again. He takes another sip before saying, “Oh. Right. I am sorry to hear that. Your Mother was...a good woman, James.”

I nod at him, but I’m a little surprised to hear him say that. I always thought he never knew her all that well.

I clean the dishes and pick up my white jacket for work. When I leave the trailer Dad is still sitting at the table, sipping his drink and ashing towards the butter dish.

When I’m going to say something it usually sounds okay in my head. But once I say it I don’t blame people for not always understanding what I’m saying, because I think that if I didn’t know, if I was just hearing somebody else saying what I’m saying, then some times I might not understand it either. So even though I decide to talk to one of the doctors out a Willow Farm about my Dad soon after he shows up and moves in, it takes a couple of days before I have it pretty well planned out just what I want to say.

See, I don’t want them to get the wrong idea. I mean I want to talk to them about my Dad because there are some things that he says and does that sort of make me maybe think that I should talk to somebody. But then again, and even though they are all really good people, I don’t know just how serious the doctors might take it. At Willow Farm lots of people do and say some odd things but it’s not always taken the same. I mean lots of times a patient will say something and all the doctors will get together and talk about how important it is, like when Ronnie, one of the MPD’s, started talking with a new lisp and a weird accent, but then other times nobody will pay any mind.
to something that seems just as strange to me, like the box of four-inch
cockroaches Dr. Palumbo keeps in his office. So while I want to talk to
somebody about my Dad, I don't know that they might either take it
real serious and bring him in or something, which I don't think I want,
or otherwise just ignore it, and sort of look at me funny for asking. So I
plan out just what I want to say real careful, and even then I want to try
it out on somebody else first.

I work a day shift on the Wednesday following my Dad getting
here, and by then I'm ready to talk to somebody.

After supper the patients who have been behaving well are
allowed to go outside, weather permitting, and that day it is sunny and
I'm one of the observers assigned to take them. Willow Farm is a big
old ramshackle place with tall windows and columns and porches all
over: It used to be a plantation a long time before it was a treatment
facility. There are lots of spreading green grounds and woods all around
it, and in the back of the main building which houses the facility there
is a nice grassy slope that we keep mowed down short, with white iron
benches scattered around under some shady old sycamores. It's nice
and cool back there and the patients know that they can't leave the
mowed area unaccompanied, so they mostly settle down around on the
benches and listen to the music. The music is part of Dr. Cester-
pronounced-Chester's program and is pumped all through the building
real quiet, though the speaker on the roof of the veranda in back is on
louder so it carries. Today the music is Pavarotti singing Brindisi (I
know this because I've heard it a good thousand times before) which is
too bad because Dave, one of the Somatoform Disorders, isn't outside
on account of him being convinced Dr. Wallace has stolen his spine.
Dave usually sings along with that kind of music, and he has a real nice
voice.

John Hernandez is my partner observer that day and he goes out
on the grass in the sun with eight of the patients. John plays a little golf
on his off days, so he stands out there looking down the hill, and he
pretends the big flashlight he's carrying, even though it's noon, is a golf
club. He loosens his shoulders and starts doing some swings, acting
like he's hitting off over the woods at the base of the slope. Each time
he hits he shades his eyes with a hand and peers out over the woods,
and some of the patients on the benches do the same thing. See that's
what I mean about odd-seeming things being taken differently: John is
staff, so he can hit invisible balls out over the woods with a flashlight
and it's no big deal, but if he were a patient someone would probably change his dosage.

Bobby Lee is one of the patients out there with us, he is next to me on the veranda that runs the length of the old house's back side. He is one of the Schizos, so Bobby Lee is not his real name. The Doctors won't let the staff call any of the patients by anything but their real names, even though a lot of the Schizos and Disassociatives and MPD's don't know what their real names are and look at you real funny when you use them, like they're not sure who you're talking too. So when the Doctor's aren't around we usually call the patients by what they'll answer to.

"You want to go on down to the grass, Bobby Lee?" I ask. He can't by himself on account of he is in a wheel chair and there is no ramp.

Down on the lawn John Hernandez gets ahold of a good one and a couple of the Diso Schizos on a bench clap their hands.

"No thank you, Pete," Bobby Lee says with his deep drawl, "I can see fine from our present elevation."

Bobby Lee is an elderly black man who must have been pretty tall when he had his legs. His hair is almost all white except for a grey streak that runs through the center of his pointed beard that comes down almost to the red quilted blankets piled around his lap. His hair on top is bunchy like wool but pretty high on his forehead, though you generally can't see it because he usually wears a slouching grey felt hat with yellow braid. He is the one I want to talk to first about my Dad, but now that we're alone on the veranda I can't remember just how I wanted to say this.

"Uhm, well, you just let me know, okay?" I say.

Bobby Lee turns to me in his chair and pats my arm fondly, "I will indeed, my faithful Old War Horse." He smiles up at me real kindly and I try to smile back but it doesn't come out quite right. Bobby Lee sees it right away.

"General, is something troubling you?" he asks, looking honestly concerned. A lot of the Schizos have different sorts of "Affective" problems, either from their major disorders or as side effects from medications. What that means is that lots of times they sort of do the wrong thing when something happens, like when Sam's roommate Malcom hung himself overnight and Sam couldn't stop laughing until Dr. Palumbo sedated him. Bobby Lee doesn't have any of that unless
he's on a heavy Electro Convulsive week. Normally he's about the sharpest guy on the Farm. Except the doctors, I mean.

“Well, sort of, yes sir I guess it is,” I say, but I don't go on from there. I can't remember just how I meant to start.

Bobby Lee uses his left hand on a wheel to roll his chair back so he's facing me. “General, I do hope that any of member of my command should feel entirely comfortable in speaking with me concerning any matter.” He leans forward and takes my hand. His hand is a lot smaller than mine and feels bony, like the skin is just gritty paper wrapped around it. But his grip is real strong when he wants it to be.

Even though I can't remember how I was going to start, all of a sudden I'm talking anyway. There on the veranda in back of the main building at Willow Farm, while John shortens his grip on the flashlight and makes invisible chip shots at a sycamore, I tell General Lee about my Dad the college professor, and the Bobcats that are after him.

I'm taking his word for that, I haven't seen the Bobcats myself, but I have heard them making noise. It will be like this: Me and Dad are eating early in the morning when all of a sudden Dad will drop his fork to the table and hold one finger up in the air. He's got real long, skinny white fingers, and it's like he's shushing me or something, though I haven't been saying anything. Neither has he, because he's not real talkative like usual in the morning, so it's quiet, but he holds the finger up anyway, and I stop chewing. We wait. Dad's wearing those granny looking Dr. Palumbo glasses of his, and he looks up from behind them and flicks his eyes, they're real blood shot in the morning, all around the ceiling. After a second there's the noise again - something scampering across the curved roof of the trailer. I've been hearing that for years and up until Dad got here I just figured it was the squirrels, there's about a million of them in the trees all around the park, but Dad doesn't think so. He looks back at me and says, “Bobcats!” Then he jumps up and runs around the table as best he can, seeing as how there's not a lot of clearance between it and the wall counter, but he's not a big guy so he manages. And while he's running around he barks at the ceiling, and whatever's up there scurries quicker and the noise goes away. Dad thumps back into his chair and sort of half-laughes to himself and starts fishing in the pocket of the shirt he slept in for a smoke.

I mention to Bobby Lee that my Dad is a drinking man, so I know that a lot of time he's probably confused on a lot of things. He seems pretty sure about the Bobcats though.
"And there's more to it than that," I say, "Sometimes he just starts talking real, well, sort of odd. Like Monday, I was cleaning up the kitchenette, dusting all the cabinets, then wiping down the counters, then draining the fridge, then mopping the floor, and as I'm finishing up I smell cigarette smoke and look over and there's my Dad in the end of the little hall to the bedroom, where he's been sleeping, you know, though it's the middle of the afternoon, and he just looks at me and says something like, 'Politic, cautious, and meticulous. Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse.' Well, I don't know what to say to that, and after another minute he just turns back around and goes back to bed for three more hours."

Bobby Lee listens real close as I tell him this, nodding every so often. I just keep on talking, about my Dad. Most nights he has gone out and he hasn't always gotten back by morning. Since I work both day and night shifts at Willow Farm on different days, we've only been at home together a couple of times, and then if Dad's not eating he's most always sleeping.

"It just seems," I tell Bobby Lee, trying to sort of wrap up because I think I might be rambling and besides that it is almost time to go back in. "It just seems like it's sort of strange, I mean here I don't really know the guy at all, but he's my Dad and he's moved into my trailer, and I mean except for the first day or two we haven't hardly said two words, not counting these things my Dad throws in like, 'Once more into the breech, dear friend!' when I was coming in to work Monday night and he was going out at the same time. I guess I'm just saying that I don't really know how to make out any of this, what he's saying and doing, I mean."

Bobby Lee nods. "You have not shared any of this with General Grant, I assume?" he asks. I takes me a second to recall that 'General Grant' is what he calls Dr. Palumbo.

"Ah, no sir. I wasn't just sure that..."

"That is most likely wise," Bobby Lee interrupts, narrowing his eyes, "This is just the sort of information he would use as leverage over one of my command."

"So you don't think I should tell him?" I ask. Bobby Lee shakes his head a little wildly. Almost too wildly for a bit, because for just a second it looks like he's having a Dystonic shaking fit, which several of the patients on heavy Haldol or Thorazine programs get occasionally.
“Tell no one!” he snaps, stopping his head shaking and staring up at me. He grabs my hand in one of his, and as John calls from the lawn that it’s time to go back in Bobby Lee squeezes hard enough to hurt. I decide to take Bobby Lee’s advice for a while, but I change my mind after things with my Dad get worse.

I get off work a bit early Thursday, at about seven. Instead of driving straight home, though, I take the county roads into Tuxedo. It is grocery day and I like to go to the store before it gets busy. With my Dad living with me I will need to buy more food, too. The Winn Dixie doesn’t open until eight so I park the truck in the lot and wait.

Tuxedo is not a big town. It is on both banks of the Willow Run, but that is not much more than a crick, and little more than a trickle in summer. From about anywhere in the town you can pretty much see the rest of it, and from the W-D parking lot I can see the top of the junior high across the Run. It is a big old brick building that was put up in the forties as the school for everything from kiddy-garden to high school. I haven’t been in there for sixteen years, but all of a sudden I start thinking about the library that is next door to it. I think I still have a library card, and sure enough I find it in a back fold of my wallet with the two-dollar bill Aunt Emma gave me when I was five. The card is old and yellow, but I can still make out my name, Jimmy Braithwaite, written in faded blue ink. My teachers always said I had nice handwriting, that was the one thing I could do all right.

I start the truck up and drive it across the Main street bridge to the junior high school side of town. The library is right there where I remember in the school’s shadow - just a little grey bump of a building. I pull in front but the hand-lettered sign in the window says that the library doesn’t open until ten in the summer. I wait in my truck.

Just before ten, the lady I guess is the librarian now pulls into the lot in a little shiny red car. She is young and very pretty, with lots of light brown hair, and she sees me sitting in my truck and doesn’t get out of her car. I know I’m a sort of spooky looking big guy in my white coat with a Braves cap on backwards, and I guess if I was a pretty young woman I’d keep an eye on me, too.

I sit in the truck and try to think of something I can do to let her know that I don’t mean no harm and all I want is to check out a book about bobcats so I can show my Dad that they don’t live around here and he doesn’t have to worry. A couple of days he has gone out in the
woods and I guess sort of wandered around with a bottle or two, “Communing” he calls it, or “Thoreau-ing,” and once when he came back he was talking about bobcat prints. There may be bad things out in the woods, I don’t know, but I’m pretty sure there’s no bobcats.

I can’t think of anything to do that would let the librarian know that this is all I want, and she just keeps looking out of her car at my truck with her hands still on her steering wheel. I start the truck again and drive back to the Winn Dixie.

I don’t know that Dad would believe a book anyway, so I guess the whole thing was all a stupid idea in the first place, and now I feel bad for scaring the poor librarian lady for no good reason.

It is soon after I get home that my Dad leaves with the hammer, so I decide that Friday, Bobby Lee or no, I should try to talk to a doctor.

Doctor Palumbo has three locks on his office door, all of them take different keys. He has a huge key ring he generally carries on his belt, must of us staff do, and for some reason his office keys are not separated from all the others. It takes him more than two minutes to go through all his keys until he gets the right three and opens the door.

He leads the way into his office, and the hissing starts as soon as he turns the lights on. Dr. Palumbo’s office is in a first floor back corner of Willow Farm, with two big tall windows on both the outside walls, the kind that stick out from the building and have benches on the inside. The windows are all covered with heavy shutters, and as all the old furniture - the huge desk, the tall-backed chairs - and the wooden floor are all shades of brown, the office is always dark even with the lights on. It’s sort of like a big wooden cave at the end of a hall, and the cigarettes he smokes in there make it all smell dry and abandoned. There are things living in there, though.

The hissing comes from a clear plastic case a bit taller than a shoe box. It’s sitting on a bureau against a wall next to a special lamp that puts out a sort of purple-blue colored light. Some of Dr. Palumbo’s degrees and things are framed on the wall behind it, all the walls are pretty much covered with certificates and papers written in old-fashioned looking letters, under glass.

“G’afternoon, ladies and laddies,” Dr. Palumbo says towards the hissing box. He has an odd way of talking - the staff says it is because he is originally from N’Orleans - and Doctors Wallace and Cester-
pronounced—Chester are always sort of teasing him about it, even though he's their boss. He's everybody's boss. He tosses his clipboard on the bureau and picks the clear case right up to his face; the top is heavy black plastic with air holes and it's got a handle just like a brief case. He holds the case to eye level, just inches in front of his silver-rimmed granny glasses, scrunching his nose up to get the little lenses right in front of his eyes. In the case there is about an inch of wood-chips, a cardboard tube from a toilet paper roll, and four hissing cockroaches from Madagascar. Each one looks like a fat piece of grapefruit that has gone bad and turned black, only they've got legs and waving antennas the size of knitting needles. I'm still at the office doorway, but I can see them in the case crawling on top of each other.

"And how are we today?" Dr. Palumbo says, tapping the side of the case with his fingernails. The roaches hiss louder and he chuckles before setting the case back down and going to his seat behind his desk. Right away he takes a pack of cigarettes out of the pocket of his white lab coat and lights one up. He notices I'm still standing at the doorway and he motions me to a chair. I take a seat in one, even though its high back isn't really wide enough for me and I have to hunch my shoulders a bit to get into it.

"So what's on your mind, Jimbo?" he asks me, leaning forward with his elbows on the desk and looking at me over the top of his glasses, which is how he looks at the patients when he wants it to be clear he's listening seriously. It sort of makes me a little nervous, his eyes are dark black, not all that different a color than his roaches.

Before I can answer, a hiss like I never heard before comes from the roach box. "Ho! Hang on there, minute!" Dr. Palumbo holds a finger up at me and he shoots up out of his chair and scampers back over to the bureau, leaving his cigarette burning in a black glass ash tray on the desk.

"It's a fight!" he says, like maybe this was something he wanted for Christmas. He doesn't look back at me but he holds an arm out and waves me over. I squeeze out of the chair and go stand next to him.

"The males are facing off!" he says. In the case, the two bigger roaches are head-to-head on top of the toilet paper tube, shoving against each other. Their thick little legs scratch over the cardboard as they fight. The two other roaches - the females, I guess - are on the other side of the case pretty much ignoring the whole thing.
Dr. Palumbo's eyes are huge and he's grinning almost from ear to ear. He whispers at me from the side of his mouth while we watch the roaches.

“See, the reason you get two male Madagascar cackaroaches in with two females is that two males won't let the other one breed! You see this here? If these two fellows wanted, they could pair off however they desire, but cackaroaches won't do that! No, see each of these two boys here wants both of the ladies for his own self!”

The male that's a little bit bigger than the other one, a good bit bigger than my thumb, and I've got big hands, has been pushing the smaller one slowly back. The smaller one's backside is hanging off the end of the toilet paper tube, and with one more shove the bigger one sends him over. Dr. Palumbo straightens up and claps.

“So what's the winner do now?” I ask. Dr. Palumbo looks at me and laughs. “Nothing! Look at the po'boy!”

I do. The bigger roach just stays where it is on top of the tube, waving its antennas slowly around.

“Now that he's won, he's too damn tired to take advantage! And by the time he gets his breath back, the other male'll be ready, too! There's the beauty of it: Long as you got two male Madagascar cackaroaches, they won't ever let the other one breed, and you don't have to worry about eggs!”

Dr. Palumbo laughs some more and shakes his head while he walks back over to his desk. The cigarette in the ash tray is dead.

“People think human beings are the only one of all God's creatures that suffer from insanity,” he says, sitting down and fishing out a new smoke. “But here these cackaroaches'll keep each other one miserable rather than both be happy! Fact is you can look at most anything in nature, and in some way, every once in a while, everything starts to look like it's plumb crazy!”

He smiles at me and takes a big pull from his cigarette; the paper at the end crackles like a hiss. I thank him for his time and leave before he remembers I wanted to talk to him.

It takes me some doing to find anybody else to talk to: Dr. Wallace is off Fridays and Cester-pronounced-Chester isn't in any of his normal places. He's not in the big green rooms upstairs where he does his group shouting meetings, not in the kitchens planning out menus with the staff, not in his basement office where the controls for the
music he plays all through Willow Farm are. Thinking about that last thing makes me realize that there is still music playing, though I hadn't been noticing at all. It's funny, but even though the music is always on, you almost never notice it inside, except for maybe every hour or so when Dr. Cester changes tapes - then you hear it for a short while until it sort of fades out on you. When I think about it and stop walking though, and stand real still and hardly breathing in an empty hall, I can hear it again. There are speakers everywhere, but you don't see them. Right now it is instrumental music from a movie I never saw called Chariots Of Fire. Dr. Cester has a lot of tapes, but by now we know them all by heart.

The music is near the middle of the tape so Dr. Cester won't be back at his office to change it for a good half hour. I think about waiting at his door but after the business with Dr. Palumbo and his roaches I get a little squirmy standing in the dark basement hall. I wander around some more and find John Hernandez watching TV in the lounge with some patients. John is pretty involved in some talk show; when I come up to him he grins at me, points at the screen and says, “Lesbians!” but he tells me he thought he saw Dr. Cester in the East Wing.

Only part of the second floor is open in the East Wing. It is where some of the patients live in separate wards, with their own rooms, instead of all together in the west dorms. That means the patients there are either come from people with a bit of money, or are dangerous, or both. That's where I find Dr. Cester-pronounced-Chester.

Dr. Cester is the newest doctor at Willow Farm. He has been here for three years now, since Dr. Mottet got removed after a catatonic patient in his care got pregnant. Dr. Cester-pronounced-Chester is sort of different than the other doctors (they say it is on account of he's from California) and he made some changes when he got here, like the music for one, and the colored walls for another. Dr. Cester got Dr. Palumbo to agree to have the walls in the patient areas all painted different colors with names like “azure,” and “amber,” and “kelly,” though to me they look like blue, and orange, and so forth. Before that all the inside walls were just white-washed, so I guess it looks nicer now.

I find Dr. Cester in the hall outside the Psychopath ward, staring at one of his walls, a sort of fleshy-pink colored one. There is a black footprint on the wall at eye level, and Dr. Cester is studying it real close with one of his bushy blond eyebrows raised, humming to himself, and
rocking on his heels. I come up next to him but he doesn't seem to notice, so I clear my throat. He jerks and turns towards me.

“Oh, Jim!” he says, “You startled me! You sure do move quietly for a guy your size!”

“Sorry, Dr. Chester,” I say. He takes a hand out of his lab coat pocket and waves it. “Not a problem, I suppose I was fairly engrossed. Take a look at this, would you?”

He points at the footprint. It looks like the black scuff of a sneaker sole, all wavy lines and treads. It is a good six feet off the ground.

“I noticed it out of the corner of my eye,” Dr. Chester-pronounced-Chester says, “and I'm thinking, 'How did that get up there?' I mean, that is one serious Van Damme jump off the floor!"

I would have figured somebody probably took off their shoe and pressed it up there with a hand, but I don't say anything. The doctors generally aren't interested in the staff's ideas on things like this.

“So I'm staring at this print, wondering if the guy had a ladder, and after I'm looking at it for a while, I start to make out this face, right here...

Dr. Cester brings a hand up to parts of the footprint. “See? Right here you've got two eyes, and a Roman-looking nose, a good square jaw, you see the beard? You see that?”

I see lines. Wavy black scuffs on the pink wall.

“I suppose it could be,” I say.

Dr. Cester-pronounced-Chester nods. The faint music reminds me that it was on by stopping with a click, but Dr. Cester doesn't seem to notice. I figure he is pretty busy, so I just go on down the hall past him and the bolted door to the Psychopath ward, then back down the yellow stair well at the end of the hall.

I work a double on the Saturday after Dad first showed. He still hasn't come back since the hammer thing on Thursday, and I'm not sure any more if I should still talk with somebody about him. He told me that thing about calling Ishmael if he didn't come back, but I don't know who that is. I just leave his stuff in the bedroom alone and keep sleeping out on the couch.

Even if I was still going to talk to Dr. Wallace about Dad, Saturday wouldn't have worked. It was one of those bad days we get once in a while at Willow Farm.
After supper I’m out in back again with John Hernandez and nine patients. The music today is the Glen Miller Orchestra, good toe-tapping music. John and I help Bobby Lee down to the lawn in his chair, then John starts doing some more golf stuff with his flashlight and I lean against a tree by Bobby Lee. He isn’t real talkative today on an account of Dr. Palumbo has him on a new series of medication, so he’s not all-there. Once in a while I have to wipe some drool off his chin before it gets in his beard, and he doesn’t even move when I do it.

John swings his flashlight in a deep arc and makes a popping noise with his cheek and tongue. “Hoo-wee!” he yells, “I got me all of that one, sure enough!”

Walter is one of the patients out there with us. He is a young man and what we used to call a manic, but is now called a Bipolar, which always sounded like some kind of bear to me. He has been having some episodes this week, though he seemed okay today, and he sits on a bench the other side of John with his head lopsided because of the bright red crash helmet buckled to it. Walter has been known to do some head banging. When John gets all of that one hit, Walter starts to twitch, and finally he shoots up off the bench and goes tearing down the hill in the direction that the golf ball would have gone, if there had been a golf ball. He is screaming, “I got it! I got it! I got it!” at the top of his lungs.

Me and John just sort of blink after Walter for a second as he leaves the mowed area of lawn and makes for the woods, his bruised knees and elbows pumping along as the bath robe he’s wearing flaps around. Me and John look at each other then both jump: John takes off down the hill shouting, “Hit the switch!” and I pound up the stairs and smack the staff call button on the veranda. The patients on the lawn mostly just sit there looking curious, except for one forty-year-old Diso Schizoid who starts to cry for her mommy, and Bobby Lee.

Bobby Lee seems to shake out of his fog a bit and he looks after Walter’s red helmet as it disappears between the trees in the woods. He pushes himself up on his arm rests and hollers, “Ride, Stuart! Ride!” flecking spit from his mouth. Then the other patients all start whooping and Bobby Lee starts shaking harder and then pitches forward out of his chair. The quilts fall away from his lower body and the stumps of his knees rub over the grass as he tries to crawl towards the lip of the hill.
It takes us hours to get everything settled down. I stop Bobby before he hurts himself but he still puts up a struggle until Dr. Wallace comes charging out of the facility and tranqs him. I notice Dr. Wallace is wearing white sneaker shoes and I wonder for a second about Dr. Cester's wall. Before the rest of the staff that suddenly appear have organized a search party (we have some rules for this sort of thing, though it hasn't come up much), John comes back out of the woods without either Walter or his big flashlight. What he does have is an ugly set of bleeding bite marks in his shoulder. Dr. Palumbo is there by then and he gets the search started, sending teams of staff out into the woods. The whole patient population is riled up from the alarm, though, and all the doctors, even Dr. Cester who is called in from home, spend the next couple of hours roaming the colored halls with the pockets of their lab coats bulging with vials, and syringes in their hands, tranquilizing everything that moves or makes noise. After that Dr. Palumbo is fit to be tied himself and he sends everybody out to stumble through the woods all night. Even so, we don't see Walter at all until he comes back of his own accord.

Thursday was the last time I ever saw my Dad. When I get home with the groceries after not going to the library my Dad isn't at the trailer, though his car is in front. The night before when I had gone in for the late shift Dad was gone too, but so was his car. Now the car is back, but Dad isn't. I don't know what that means, and even though I'd been up all night and I have another shift Friday morning, I can't get to sleep for thinking about it. I lie on my little half-couch, which is where I've been sleeping since Dad got here even though my legs hang off one end and I have to sort of wedge my head up on a pillow against the wall at the other end. It's light out, another sunny day, and all I've got on the windows are my duck-curtains, so inside the trailer it is all kind of blue, with white and yellow spaces of light where the sun shines through the ducks. When the wind pulls at the curtains it looks sort of like those duck-shapes are swimming around on the walls. I've got better curtains that keep out the light altogether, but they are back in the bedroom.

I think maybe I should go out and look for my Dad but I don't have any real idea where he could be. I know at night he has been going to the bars in Tuxedo, on account of the match books I keep finding on the floor or once in a while in the garbage. Thing is; I don't
think that those places are open this early in the day. Though on some
days Dad has gone out “Thoreau-ing” in the woods back of the park,
I'm not real clear on what that is and don't know if he'd want to be
interrupted doing it, even if I could find him. There is miles and miles
of woods back there, they stretch all the way to Willow Farm.

Still, I'm almost decided to get up and at least look around the
park some for him, maybe ask if anybody saw him around, but before
I've made up my mind for sure, Dad comes back. This is at about four
in the afternoon.

There's a ruckus from the front door and after a struggle Dad
shoves it open and almost falls inside. His pants, beige slacks again, are
covered with mud and grass stains, and his shirt is only half buttoned
and not tucked in. His face is beet red, like he's been out in the sun all
day. He comes into the trailer, dark compared to the outside, and
blinks around until he sees me on the couch. He sways in the open
doorway with the smell of honeysuckle drifting in around him.

“Jim, old fruit of my loins!” he says to me, almost in a bark. His
voice is way too loud for inside and his words run together. “Where've
you been all my life?”

I'm not sure what he means by that - I've been here but I don't
know about him - but he doesn't wait for me to answer anyway.

“Have we got a hammer about?” he asks.

I'm sitting up on the couch by this point. I look at Dad real
careful. I don't know him real well - like I’ve said - but for some reason
he just doesn't seem like a guy that would have much use for a tool.
He's got real soft-looking pale white hands - except for the two fingers
always stained with cigarette smoke - and I just can't picture him
holding a hammer.

“Well?” he asks. He's swaying so much he's almost pitching over.

I nod at him.

“There's some tools under the sink,” I say, “In the red box with
the...”

Dad nods and walks to the kitchen: More like he just leans in that
direction and his feet sort of scuff across the floor to keep him upright.
I get up and follow him. He hits his knees hard in front of the counter
and yanks open the door under the sink, pulling my tool box out of the
back and knocking a bottle of Liquid Plumber and a can of Raid to the
kitchen floor. He opens the box, and starts scooping out pliers and
screwdrivers till he gets to the hammer under everything else at the
bottom. He grabs that and gets himself to his feet with a hand on the counter, pulling the hammer loose, which flips the box and spills nails all over the floor with the other tools. He holds the hammer above his head and looks at me with a huge grin that's a bit spooky.

“Coronate me, boy!” he screams, “I’m the fucking King of England!” Then he starts cackling in a way that usually gets people strapped to a table at the Farm, and he stumbles back for the door.

“Dad?” I say, but he passes by me. He bumps against the couch and almost goes down, but his feet are still moving faster than the rest of him and they keep him upright. It’s like he’s a pole somebody is balancing: Like the balancer is scampering around whichever direction the pole leans and saving it from crashing to the ground a hundred times. I’m almost sure he’s not going to make the two stairs down to the sidewalk and I hurry behind him, but he stays upright all the way to the side of his car. Once there, he leans over heavy against the driver’s door.

“Dad?” I ask again, from the porch. He is singing now.

“I’d hammer out justice, I’d hammer out freeeeeeee-dom!!!”

My Dad swings the hammer sideways into his driver-side window. The glass shatters loud across the front seat and the hot, quiet afternoon.

Now I really don’t know what to make of that. I’m still standing on the porch and maybe half thinking that I’m still asleep on the couch with the little duck shapes shining on me. My Dad tosses the hammer into the car, then reaches in through the broken window and fumbles around on the steering column. He pulls his arm back out, and he’s holding the keys.

“Locked myself out,” he says to me, like it’s just a matter-of-fact thing. He unlocks the car door with the key even though he could just reach inside again. He opens the door and starts brushing glass out off the driver seat with his bare hand. I just stare.

After a good amount of glass tinkles out onto the gravel, Dad swings into the car and flops into his seat. He slams the door behind him and the last bit of glass falls out of the broken window. He starts the car and looks out the windshield at me with a big grin. He salutes, and when he does, a big fat spot of blood splats on the left lens of his glasses.

“If I’m not back by tomorrow,” he shouts over the engine, “call me Ishmael!” He snaps the salute forward and more blood flecks on the
inside of the windshield. Then he puts the car in reverse and whips hard back into the lot, pointing the car at the exit. Before he squeals out and away, I see the windshield wipers come on, and I wonder if my Dad thinks that they will wipe away the blood. His blood. Mine.

I could have told him they won't ever do that, but I didn't know how.

Dad never does show again.

Two days after he makes his break, Walter comes back to Willow Farm.

I wasn't on shift the morning Walter came back, but I got the whole story a number of times from the staff that was. Nobody had talked about anything but Walter for the two days he was gone, though of course they only talked about it to each other because Dr. Palumbo would have fired anybody saying anything to anybody else, even though he himself was almost to the point of calling the police. Dr. Palumbo did fire John Hernandez, though, and he might have fired me too, if he'd thought about it.

But he didn't, so I was there to hear the story of Walter's return over and over again. There really wasn't much to it: All he did was come in through the front door all dirty - robe all ripped, red crash helmet still on - and tell the nurse at the desk that he was hungry. Scared the hell out of a couple people who were waiting for visiting hours in the lobby though. By the time I saw him again Walter was cleaned up and sedated pretty heavy, but he must have been a sight that morning; I heard from the nurse herself that she thought Walter was going to kill her - he looked that wild.

He probably could have killed her, if he'd been of a mind to. He had lost John's Flashlight sometime while he was out there - wherever he was - but somewhere he had got something to replace it. A hammer. A regular one, like you'd find in any toolbox under a sink. Nobody knew where he'd got it, but nobody seemed real bothered either. I don't know that anybody even asked him. Maybe I should have said something, but I don't know what.

I waited another week, then I went back to sleeping in the bedroom of my trailer. I put Dad's clothes that were lying around back in his bag with the bottles, and put the whole works in a closet, where it still is now, though I don't think anymore that my Dad is coming back again.
Could be he just drove back north, back to Connecticut. Maybe he pitched that hammer out a window along the highway that runs out past the Farm. Or maybe he turned off, took one of the old rutty dirt roads that criss-cross the woods that side of town. Old carriage paths, I think my Aunt Emma told me once, unused roads that nobody remembers, that went somewhere forgotten. A car could get stuck out there, and who knows what somebody would run into trying to “Thoreau” their way back to the highway in the dark. Bobcats? Something worse?

You’re lost, and you see a flashlight shining in the woods. It must be somebody looking for you, isn’t that what you’d think? Your son, come to find you, like you said you came to find him.

I can’t know any of that, of course, but sometimes at night it is what my thoughts will run to, when I’m almost asleep and I hear a squirrel’s little nails scrabbling over the roof of the trailer. I think maybe I should run myself out into those shady woods, out into the swallowing green mouth of rustling breezes and trickling waters and things you can’t see moving under the leaves on the ground. But how could anyone find anything out there? Or maybe that’s the point. Maybe you only run into those woods when you’re past wanting to be found. And that is not me.

But now, I don’t think that anybody is looking for me. Not anymore.

Eddie McNally