The Fast Lane

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Abstract

I worked as a clinical psychologist for 25 years. I majored in psychology at Northwestern University, earned my M.A. in psychology at the University of Hawaii, and earned my Ph.D. in psychology at Tufts University. After a year of post-doctoral supervision I took a national examination in psychology and became licensed. This is a clinical study of a young woman I treated who had bipolar disorder. It was triggered by childbirth. In her manic phase her mind raced, she couldn't sleep, and she spent money excessively. She was hospitalized and given various medications to stabilize her moods. When she went to live in a group home she went back to school and became an activities director at a senior living home. My case study follows in the tradition of Studs Terkel who wrote about cases of work life.

“I love my new job,” Sheila said to her parents as they sat outside for a cookout. Steaks sizzled on the grill by the picnic table. Gold, orange, and crimson leaves let go of their branches and glided to the ground.
“What exactly do you do?” her mother asked. She was a plumpish woman with prematurely silver-white hair.

“Mostly I answer the phones, direct visitors to the right people, order supplies, and file when I have time. I love meeting all the new people.”

“Is that where you met Clark?” asked her father, a tall, lean man who always seemed in a hurry. He looked younger than his middle age in his Red Sox baseball cap over his close-cropped brown hair.

“Yes,” said Sheila. “What of it?”

“You know we don’t approve of you dating a black man,” he said.

“I’m eighteen years old and I can date anybody I want.”

“Not when you live under my roof,” he said.

Sheila’s mother said, “Let’s not get excited. You know I have high blood pressure.”

“I can’t stand living with bigots,” Sheila said. “We’re in love and he makes me happy.”

“You’ve only dated a few months,” said her mother. “How can you be sure?”

“Well, if you must know, I’m pregnant and we’re getting married.”

“How dare you,” her father said. His nostrils flared. He pounded the table and knocked over the ketchup bottle. “You made your bed and now you can lie in it. I want you out of this house and don’t expect us to come to your wedding.”

Sheila jumped up from the picnic table and ran to her bedroom. She emerged shortly with two trash bags filled with her possessions, put them in her car, slammed the door, and peeled out of the driveway. Her parents finished their meal in silence and cleaned up.

Still wordless, they took a walk in the setting sun. Somber puffs of clouds rose above the trees. Two-hundred-year old maple trees were silhouetted against the sky; some tall and straight, some bent and gnarled. Horses in the nearby pasture grazed separately now, but often they galloped together in a pack. Sometimes, they lay down with their front legs and hooves tucked under their chests. Other times, they rolled over and thrashed from side to side as though they were scratching their backs. Sheila’s parents turned around and trudged home.
A week later, Sheila and Clark were married by a Justice of the Peace, witnessed by Clark’s cousin and his girlfriend. Sheila was proud of Clark’s broad chest. He had been a champion high school wrestler and still worked out to keep in shape.

Ashley was born six months later. When they heard, Sheila’s parents put aside their prejudices and came back into Sheila’s life.

“What a beautiful grandbaby we have,” said her mother as she nuzzled the newborn’s cheek. “When can we babysit?”

“Right now,” said Sheila. “I’m not feeling well.”

“What’s the matter?” her father asked, taking a deep breath. His heart sank as he recognized the look in her eyes. He had seen it before in his mother.

“I can’t sleep,” said Sheila. “Clark is furious with me because I bought twenty-five bathrobes and a five hundred dollar oil painting. He took them back and then cancelled the credit cards, took me off the checking account, and won’t give me any money.”

Her parents looked at Clark with raised eyebrows and he nodded.

“My mind is racing and I keep asking Clark to write things down.”

“How long has Sheila been like this?” Sheila’s father asked Clark, his voice trembling.

“It’s been a while,” said Clark. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Honey,” Sheila’s father said to his wife, “Why don’t you watch Ashley while I take Sheila and Clark out for ice cream?”

He drove straight to the emergency room of the hospital where Sheila was hospitalized, and after several hours of questioning by different doctors, she was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder. Sheila was agitated and tried to strangle a nurse. Later when she threw a chair she was put in six-point restraints on a locked unit. Her arms, legs, head, and chest were held down in her bed by leather straps lined with lamb’s wool. The nurse gave her a tranquilizer.

When Sheila came to, she had no idea where she was or what was happening. Voices droned in the distance but she couldn’t make them out. She couldn’t focus her eyes and her tongue felt heavy. Every muscle ached and she couldn’t move. She wondered if she were buried alive in a casket.

“Help me,” she whispered hoarsely, her heart pounding.
“I’m here,” the aide said, taking her hand. “You’re in the hospital. We’re taking care of you.”

“What happened?” Sheila asked.

“You got violent so we had to tranquilize and restrain you.”

“Please let me loose,” Sheila said, the tears streaming down her cheeks. “I want to go home. I want to see my baby.” Her breasts were full of milk and hurt.

“You can’t yet until you see your doctor and get the right medications,” the aide said. “But I’ll remove your restraints and take you to your room where you can rest.”

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Sheila’s parents visited. After walking past the red brick buildings of the hospital, with ivy peeking in the windows, they opened the front door. The guard had them sign in and directed them toward Sheila’s unit. They peered through the glass over chicken wire as they waited for the nurse to unlock the metal door with a heavy ring of keys and lead them to the room where Sheila sat on her rumpled bed.

“I don’t like my doctor and I want to go home,” Sheila said. “I want to see Ashley.”

“You can see her when they say you’re ready,” her mother said. “We’re taking good care of her.”

“Clark only visited me once,” Sheila said, her voice cracking. “He said he wants a separation because he can’t take care of me and Ashley.”

“We know, honey,” her father said. “He told us.”

Her father’s eyes filled up with tears. Sheila sat with her mouth ajar, her jaw twitching. She showed them her journal. “The Almighty has infinite wisdom,” it read. “I see the truth of it all. Noble kindness. Forever powerful. Love is everywhere and nowhere.” Her father turned his head and blew his nose. He remembered how frightened he had been as a boy when his mother was hospitalized. Back then, he didn’t know what it was. He thought it was exhaustion from having thirteen children.

“I’m tired,” said Sheila with a yawn. “I need to take a nap.”

“O.K.” said her mother. “Here is some money for the pay phone. Call us tonight when you have time.”
Eight weeks later Sheila returned home in a sullen mood. They fought. She hit her father on the shoulder and threw a glass against the wall.

“You will never hit me or throw anything in this house again, young lady,” said her father. “Is that understood? Also, you will look at me when I’m speaking to you.” His hands were shaking.

“You’re controlling my life,” Sheila said. “You won’t let me drive, give me any money, let me cook, or make decisions about anything, even about my own daughter.” Her skin and scalp were broken out in crusty red blotches, and she had gained forty pounds from her Lithium medication.

“You are welcome to do the dishes, vacuum, and clean up your room,” said her mother. “All you do is sleep and watch T.V.”

“We want you to do more when you’re ready,” her father said. “We just have to go slowly. You can’t drive because you were stopped for speeding.”

“That was six months ago.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll give you money when you need it. You blew both yours and Ashley’s disability checks when you got them.”

Sheila insisted on being in charge of her medications although some days she forgot to take them. One evening she couldn’t sleep and called the police at three in the morning and accused her parents of stealing her money. The police left after Sheila’s father explained about her illness.

When Sheila went next door and asked her neighbors if she could stay with them because she couldn’t stand living at home, her parents took her back to the hospital. Sheila called her therapist from there.

“I can’t talk now because the staff is around. I’m in big trouble. We’re talking lawyers. I’m going to Clark’s house to kick out his girlfriend. I found out he even cheated on me while I was in the hospital. I told my parents I hated them and swore at them. It goes back to them not coming to my wedding and having to live by their rules and not like an adult.”

“I know things are hard for you now. Let’s talk about them at our next meeting. In the meantime, try to rest.”
No matter what medications the doctor tried, Sheila went through a period of rapid cycling of her manic and depressive moods. She was hospitalized six times in eight months.

After Sheila’s last hospitalization, her parents and therapist met with the hospital staff to plan for her discharge.

“We can’t take it anymore,” her mother said. “Sheila can’t come home. We can’t help her.” She blinked back tears. “Her father didn’t agree last time but now he agrees. She needs to live in a group home.” He sat stiffly on his chair and stared straight ahead.

“I get along better with my father because his mother was sick and he understands it,” said Sheila.

“He feels so guilty he passed on his genes,” her mother said.

“I don’t want a group home,” Sheila said. “There are rules and you have to do chores. I like being home and cared for. I want my mother to stay up at night and take care of me when I’m sick like she does with Ashley. I won’t sign the papers.”

“If your parents won’t take you, then we’ll have to discharge you to a homeless shelter,” the social worker explained. This shocked Sheila and her parents. Her father said, “If you sign the papers you can come home while you wait for an opening.”


“The program at the group home will help you gain skills so you can work toward goals of school, a job, living independently, and perhaps a relationship,” the social worker said.

Miraculously, within two weeks the social worker found a group home with an opening. A large Victorian mansion with carved wood, marble fireplaces, and brass chandeliers, it was called “La Casa de la Esperanza—The House of Hope.”

Sheila had two dinners and a sleepover scheduled, after which the housemother, Mary, told her parents, “We all fell in love with Sheila and she’ll fit in fine.”

There were rules and schedules. Mary gave out the medications and did the cooking. The girls cleaned up. They had to be out of the house between 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m., going to day treatment, school, work, or volunteering. Sheila decided to take
an Algebra 1 class and volunteer at the V. A. Hospital. They could go home one night a weekend, one weekend a month, and two weeks in the summer when Mary went on vacation. Otherwise, they did group activities, such as going to the movies and out to lunch.

Sheila sat in a winged back chair in the living room across from Mary.

“I can’t understand why I’m not allowed to go home both days of every weekend. I know I need to become independent, but my situation is different. I have a daughter and I want to be there for her.” She began to cry.

“I know that’s important to you. But you need to become part of this group first and learn skills so you can be a good mother later.”

“I cried myself to sleep thinking I wouldn’t be able to see her get on the bus the first day of school.”

Mary’s voice softened. “She’s still young, so you may be able to.” She got up and gave Sheila a hug.

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Sheila knew she had matured and had a better relationship with her parents and Ashley. She worked hard in school and did well. When she graduated from her certificate program at the local community college, she sent her therapist a picture of her in her cap and gown. She already had a job working as an activities director for people in a nursing home. “I feel I have a future now,” she wrote.