BREAKDOWN

Ross Helman had a nervous breakdown.

He was committed to the Richmond State Hospital in Richmond, Indiana on the recommendation of his doctor. Located in Wayne County, about seventy-five miles east of Indianapolis near the Ohio border, this was one of six official psychiatric facilities in the state.

Ross was twenty-nine years old and single. He worked as an automotive computer diagnostic technician at the Tom Wood Ford dealership since graduating from Ivy Tech Community College in Indiana's capital seven years ago. He lived in a modest $519/mo. studio apartment at Cambridge Commons on Oakhurst Drive in one of the city's typical neighborhoods.

After his supervisor at Ford -- Bob Brinker --noticed Helman's inability to focus on his job and his increasing withdrawal from his coworkers, Ross admitted in private to suffering from insomnia, loss of appetite, and nightmares. Bob suggested an early two-week vacation, but Ross declined. "It wouldn't help," he replied. "I'm down too low." Brinker then suggested that Helman speak with his doctor, or at least to a counselor. Ross agreed. It was a Wednesday. "Finish your shift, then take off until Monday, Ross," Bob decided. "We can cover for your absence until then. I hope you get better soon, amigo."

Helman made an appointment for the following afternoon with Dr. Mark Bradley, his physician. After listening to his patient's complaints, he gave Ross a complete examination.

Afterwards, the doctor gave his assessment. "Physically, you check out, Ross. You are obviously rundown and tired. We'll do a routine blood draw, but I suspect nothing unusual will show up. It sounds from the symptoms that you are describing that your underlying cause of distress is psychological. I'm going to recommend that you see a psychiatrist friend of mine, Dr. Anita Reynolds. In the meantime, perhaps I can prescribe an anti-depressant, or maybe some sleeping pills."

"NO! NO SLEEPING PILLS!" Ross exclaimed, clearly frightened and panicky. He put his face in his hands, distraught. He began to shake. "No sleeping pills," he said again, in a softer, pleading voice. "Please no, Dr Bradley."

Mark was understandably shocked by his patient's alarming, atypical outburst. "O.K....it's alright, Ross. Forget that I suggested it. We'll skip any medications for now. But you need to see Dr. Reynolds as soon as possible, agreed?"

Helman promised that he would.

Unfortunately, the next available appointment with the psychiatrist wasn't until Tuesday, so Ross had to call his boss at the dealership and tell him he wouldn't be back until at least Wednesday. Bob said, after a short pause, that would be possible. "But not much longer, O.K., good buddy? Things are starting to pile up here, and the Big Guys are starting to bite my ass."

Ross Helman met Dr. Anita Reynolds for his appointment at 2:00 p.m. in her downtown Indianapolis office.

Over the course of an hour, he unloaded his painful mental burdens while she carefully took notes.

"I'm basically estranged from my parents and my two older brothers, and pretty much isolated from the rest of my relatives too," Ross admitted. "Things that used to give me pleasure simply don't anymore. I'm sad all of the time. I feel like I have nothing to look forward to. I think about the finality of death, you know, and the futility of life in general. I mean, seriously...why should we bother? It all is useless in the end. All that we learn and struggle with and accomplish over the course of our lives suddenly vanishes, without even a moment's notice."

"But what about pushing back on such universal loneliness and despair with a hopeful relationship to a nice young woman?" Dr. Reynolds gently suggested. "Perhaps falling in love and getting married, and helping support and raise a family would help get your mind out of its dark, downward cycle. Life does have its share of joys, fun, and triumphs along with its challenges and existential absurdities, Ross. Focusing outside of oneself is a clear, proven path to better mental health, as is a belief in a Higher Power -- or faith, if you prefer to call it that."

Helman responded by confessing to having several female relationships over the years. "I have slept with a few women too, some casually, some seriously. But lately, I can't bring myself to get close to any one particular woman. I freeze up at a certain point, then break it off and flee. What is wrong with me, Doctor?"

"Exactly what time period do you mean by the word 'lately,' Ross?" Anita asked.

"About four years," he replied. The doctor's eyebrows raised involuntarily at hearing that.

The sixty-minute session was quickly up. Psychiatrist and patient continued to meet for an hour each week over the next six months. But Helman's symptoms continued to get worse. He lost weight and began regularly drinking. His studio apartment became a pigsty. He lost his job at the Ford dealership. He stopped going to Dr. Reynolds for counseling. When he finally showed up for an appointment with Dr. Bradley, Mark was alarmed at Ross' appearance and demeanor. That was when he decided to have Helman formally committed to Richmond State Hospital for a minimum of three months. "It appears that you are having a nervous breakdown, Ross, but I'm sure we can get you the help you need, and get your life back to normal," Dr. Bradley reassured his patient. "Plus, the State picks up the cost, so you don't have to worry about that."

Richmond State Hospital was founded in 1890, but now it was a modern co-ed facility. Gone were the 'snake pit' days of straightjackets, forced restraints, lobotomies, and electro-shock therapy -- all of which were in vogue up until the 1960's. Nowadays, individual and group counseling, careful diet, exercise, creative activities, rest, and pharmaceuticals were used to help bring patients back to improved mental health.

When Helman arrived with a single suitcase after being picked up at his apartment by a County van, he was warmly met by Dr. Paul Roebuck, the facility's director.

"Welcome, Ross! We have you scheduled for a nice three months with us. I'll take you to your room in the men's ward in a moment. But first, I need to go over some simple rules that we have here. No sharp objects like scissors, nail clippers, or straight-edged razors. No cell phones. No credit cards. No glass containers. No alcohol or tobacco. No OTC medicines or vitamins. No metal hangers. No weapons or matches. These prohibitions are both for your safety and the safety of others. Also, we don't lock you in here at Richmond. But we ask you not to leave our premises for the duration of your stay. Any questions so far?" he smiled. Helman shook his head no. "Visiting days are Saturday, Sunday, and holidays, from 1-4 p.m. We provide everything else that you will need. Did you bring a week's worth of clothing like Dr. Bradley told you?" Ross nodded yes. "Good. Let's go. We'll stop and do your photo i.d. badge on the way." Ross turned in his wallet and cell phone, which would be secured and then returned when his three-month stay was completed.

Helman's room was clean and attractive, with a vase of fresh flowers to welcome him and a large window overlooking the facility's grounds. The view reminded one of a small college campus, with wide green quads, maple trees, and various brick buildings. Athletic fields could also be seen in the distance. Because the weather was sunny and warming up on this late May morning, Ross observed several white-coated orderlies and various patients going to and fro. The overall impression to the newcomer was of peacefulness and calm efficiency.

While he unpacked his suitcase and was arranging his closet and drawers, there was a soft knock on his still-open door.

"Hi Ross! I'm Carl, the chief orderly on this floor." The large African-American grinned a welcome. "I come by to remind our guests of where they are supposed to be and when, if they forget or lose their daily schedule." He handed Helman a printed sheet. "Also, if you ever have any problem with needing supplies, or if want to know what's on the day's food menu, or if you just want to chat, I'm the man to see. I've been working here for twelve years now, and I'm sure you will like it. No pressures or worries at Richmond! We treat you right and help you get better. The whole staff at Richmond is friendly and relaxed. And the meals are really great too." Carl patted his impressive belly, and chuckled. "Well, Ross, I'll let you settle in now. See you later! Lunch is coming up in about an hour...it's in the co-ed Dining Hall, over there." He pointed out the window to the correct building.

Lunch was served cafeteria-style. Helman noticed about 150 patients there, with about the same amount of men and women, ages ranging from the early-20s to around 60. Some patients ate together -- some even in small groups with the sexes mixed -- while others ate alone and apart. The meal was tuna noodle casserole, mixed salad with choice of dressing, a fresh diced fruit medley, rolls and butter, a brownie, and coffee-tea-milk-juice-water to drink. A pleasant, upbeat instrumental music track played subtly in the background. Ross picked a far table and ate by himself, thinking and taking in the whole scene of his new environment. But he continued to feel lethargic and sad.

Helman walked the campus after his meal to get his bearings. By 1:30 p.m., he was back in his room for his first appointment with his primary care supervisor, Dr. Deena Subret, a French-Canadian specialist from Montreal, age 38, married, with one daughter. After introducing herself and sitting opposite him in a chair, the doctor outlined Ross' course of treatment, which included both individual and group therapy sessions, as well as a creative activity schedule and an exercise regimen. "We find that talking a lot releases most of our patient's repressed feelings. Sometimes, however, we need to try a few psychotropic drugs or even a little hypnotherapy to get at the root cause of the problem. Your diet will be unrestricted, and you can rest or nap as you feel the need to. The good news in your situation, Ross, is that you are young, and that you presumably want to get better and rejoin the world. I am very hopeful." She put his medical file down on her lap, then reached over and gently pressed his hand in a gesture of kindness. "I believe that you will be alright again after your three months here, so try not to worry too much. 'One day at a time' is our motto at Richmond. And, in my professional observations, small successes usually lead to big recovery breakthroughs." She left him a few pamphlets to read at his leisure on the subjects of ways to fight depression and how to improve inter-personal relationships. "We'll do a few simple cognitive assessment tests tomorrow, Ross, and establish a baseline to help chart your progress."

The Richmond facility had no internet or television available for its patients because such diversions were deemed too wasteful of time, and potentially too excitable in a negative way. Letters could be written and received, however, and each patient's room had a radio which was specially set to receive a few useful channels of music and news. There was also a guest library with books, magazines, and newspapers. And every Saturday night was Movie Night in the large auditorium, featuring non-violent, G-rated films.

Every day at 10 a.m., Ross had a co-ed group therapy session. He was one of a dozen attendees, moderated by Dr. Subret, who clutched a clipboard for taking notes as the group sat in a circle. At first, Helman silently 'passed' when it was his turn to talk and share, but as the days went by, he slowly opened up and revealed his pain and confusion. He was carefully praised and encouraged by both Deena and others in the group, several of whom had been at Richmond now for a few months. Ross was gradually beginning to connect names with faces, and was able to relate one-on-one with some of the other patients at meal times and during exercise sessions. He also discovered that he liked to paint watercolor landscapes and enjoyed making small clay sculptures in art class -- even glazing a few and hardening them to permanence in the shop kiln. Meanwhile, on separate visiting days, both Dr. Mark Bradley and Dr. Anita Reynolds came by to see how Ross was adjusting to his treatment. But he still admitted to them to having nightmares, and suffering from apathy and despair.

During one group session, a shy young woman with clipped, purple-dyed hair and elaborate arm tattoos named Trixie brought up the topic of what to do if one was plagued with thoughts of self-harm and suicide. "I read once about Marilyn Monroe, and how she overdosed on sleeping pills. It seemed like an easy way to leave this shitty world," Trixie remarked, looking down on the floor, sighing. "You just fall asleep and never wake up."

But before Dr. Subret could respond, Ross plunged his face in his hands and became visibly upset, shaking nervously. Then he suddenly rose and ran out of the room, where he rushed into the nearest men's bathroom and vomited into a toilet. Deena quickly called on her walkie-talkie for the closest available orderly to immediately go and check up on Ross.

Later, in Helman's room -- after he was given a mild sedative and rested for two hours -- Dr. Subret spoke privately with Ross.

"I previously read Dr.Bradley's report on your unusual reaction to the very mention of sleeping pills. This subject must somehow be related to your mental illness, Ross. It's nothing to be ashamed or afraid of. I'm going to recommend that you undergo some hypnotherapy with our specialist, Dr. Martin McCall. That way, we can get to the bottom of this phobia, alright?"

Helman met Dr.McCall the following day in his office. The therapist was bald, in his mid-50's. He sported a neatly trimmed grey beard and wore bi-focal eyeglasses attached to a neck leash.

"Have you ever been hypnotized before, Ross?" Martin asked, smiling.

"No," Helman replied, in a flat, lackluster voice.

"It is a very pleasant sensation. All you have to do is relax. Come, lie down on this couch, and concentrate on my ballpoint pen." Ross complied as the doctor presented it. "That's right, just focus and relax. Let all of your cares and worries go away. You are getting sleepy now. Everything is safe and calm. You eyelids are getting heavy. You can't keep them open. Just let them close. Deeper and deeper...you are going asleep. Yes...yes...that's right. So sleepy. Rest...rest..."

Within two minutes, Ross was under. Dr. McCall then began asking his questions.

"What happened with sleeping pills in your past, Ross? You need to answer me completely and honestly. Why does the topic of sleeping pills upset you so much?"

Helman responded softly in a strange, remote voice.

"It was Cindi Quinn...she killed herself...my friend in Ohio saw it on the news and told me...it was my fault...she swallowed a whole bottle of sleeping pills...now she's dead!"

"Who exactly was Cindi Quinn?" the doctor gently pressed. "How did you know her? Why do you think that her death was your fault?"

"We met at Ivy Tech...we were taking different classes..but I noticed that she was very lonely...she was so shy...others made fun of her...rejected her...she was not very attractive...I took pity on her...(sighed) we dated...but then I took selfish advantage of her, just for sex...after a few months, we broke up...she pleaded with me to stay with her...(sighed) but after I left her, she killed herself!" Ross became quite agitated at this point, and started shaking his head back and forth, and moaning, his closed eyes leaking tears.

"Ross, listen to me carefully. This is Dr. McCall. I am going to count backwards from ten. When I get to number one, I will clap my hands and you will wake up. You will feel safe and relaxed. You will remember all of what you just told me. Alright now. Here we go. Ten...nine...eight..."

When Helman awoke from his hypnotized state, Dr. McCall offered him a glass of water. Martin then explained that he would discuss the results of the session with Dr. Subret, and together they would help Ross move forward and heal his nervous breakdown. "There is one important fact that you need to know, Ross. Suicide is strictly the choice of the person doing that tragic, desperate act. That person alone is responsible. Ultimately, others cannot be held accountable, even if they think they are somehow to blame. You must believe that, my friend. Now go and wash up. It's almost time for dinner. It's Salisbury steak tonight, I believe."

After Deena was informed of Ross' revelation under hypnosis, she in turn contacted Dr. Mark Bradley and Dr. Anita Reynolds back in Indianapolis with the latest Richmond State Hospital findings on Helman. It was decided that they should investigate any family and/or acquaintances of a certain Cindi Quinn, and try to find out, if possible, more on the background story of this troubled woman's life -- a person who had likewise contributed to Ross Helman's tortured mental condition.

Two days later, Dr. Bradley telephoned Dr. Reynolds with some valuable information.

"Anita, I found out that Cindi Quinn's parents are currently living in Dayton, Ohio. They agreed to meet with me on Saturday at their house. But in the meantime, they gave me the contact information for Cindi's former roommate, Sable Beaufort. She lives in Indianapolis, close by. I think you should see her and find out what she knows."

So Dr. Reynolds met Sable at a Starbucks the following afternoon, and they had a 45-minute talk. Beaufort was a petit blonde in her late 20's who worked as a city parking enforcement officer.

"I knew Cindi in high school," Sable began. "We weren't the closest of friends, but we were both kind of loners, so it was natural that we were compatible. When she asked if we could be roommates seven years ago, I agreed. We shared a two-bedroom apartment for about eighteen months, then she suddenly moved out and went back home to live with her parents. I remember when I heard that she had killed herself in a motel room in Dayton. It was shocking but not very hard to believe."

"Why do you say that?" Anita wanted to know. "Why was it not hard to believe?"

"Well, she dated a guy named Ross...Ross Hepman or Hefman I think was his full name. He was the first man in her life that ever paid any attention to her. She adored him! She shared the intimate details of their dates -- their first kiss, the heavy petting, and even when she lost her virginity to him. She claimed that she loved him and wanted them to get married. But you know how guys are. Ross got bored after a few months of screwing, and met with Cindi less and less. Eventually, he dumped her. The poor girl was devastated. Oh, how she cried, night after night! She tried to reconnect with him -- even stalking him outside the Ford dealership where he worked -- until he yelled at her one day to get out of his life once and for all. Then her health took a really bad turn. Not just irregular eating and sleeping, but next she complained of sharp abdominal pains. I prayed that she was not pregnant, because I knew that the two of them never bothered with any kind of birth control. She quit her job at Target and moved back in with her parents in Dayton soon afterwards. I guess Cindi couldn't handle the break-up and being rejected. She must have saw no other way out of her misery, so she killed herself. What an awful tragedy..." Sable took out a Kleenex and blew her nose, visibly upset with the memory. Then she added, staring deep into Dr. Reynolds' eyes: "So I hope that bastard Ross 'whatever-his-name' rots in hell."

Anita reported back to Mark later that evening.

"What a terrible story! Let's find out more from Cindi's parents when I see them on Saturday."

Dr. Bradley drove east to Dayton that morning and found the Quinn home. He was greeted by Olivia and Zachary, a nice couple in their mid-50s. Near the couch where he sat was a framed portrait of Cindi in her graduation gown from Ivy Tech. It was the first time that Mark had seen what Cindi Quinn looked like. His impression was of a typical Mid-western young woman, somewhat plain and ordinary, her face and brown hair similar to her mother. Green eyes. A nervous -- and maybe even a guarded -- smile. A non-offensive, mystery person he would never know.

After he was offered coffee and some fresh homemade oatmeal-raisin cookies, Mark listened to Cindi's story from her parent's perspective.

"She was our only child, Dr. Bradley. Cindi wasn't a genius in school, or a beauty queen, or a cheerleader. Nothing exceptional, really. But we always loved her," Olivia began.

"She was painfully shy around others too," Zachary added. "This made it hard to be accepted by her peers when she was growing up. But she was a good girl -- caring, sensitive. Cindi took care of our two dachshunds like they were her children. She liked to read a lot too."

Mark next relayed the entire story that Sable Beaufort had told Anita.

"Sable's a kind-hearted and loyal person, and she helped our Cindi out on many occasions. They hung out together in high school and later shared that apartment in Indianapolis. And we knew about Ross too -- from the promising beginning of his relationship with our daughter to the sad break-up," Mrs. Quinn recalled. "But Cindi's suicide can't fairly be blamed on that young man."

"What makes you say that?" Mark asked.

"Because when our daughter moved back home, and her stomach pains got worse, we took her to see the doctor, and they discovered through hospital tests that Cindi had Stage-4 ovarian cancer. It runs in my side of the family. My own mother died of it. It had spread all throughout our daughter's abdomen. They gave her only six months -- in inoperable pain -- to live," Zachary admitted, his eyes tearing up and his face becoming flushed.

Olivia continued. "It was rainy a few days later when Cindi came downstairs from her bedroom with an odd, distant expression on her face, and said she had to run an errand. Then she kissed me on my cheek and squeezed my hand, which surprised me a bit. Her father was still at work. She hugged the dogs and off she went and drove away. The date was October 13th. I'll never forget that dreadful day."

"That same evening, the police showed up. Cindi's body had been discovered by a maid at the Stardust Motel. She had bought a bottle of sleeping pills at the nearby Walgreen's and swallowed them all. No suicide note or anything. Dying all alone. Horrible! I still can't believe she's gone..." Zachary lamented, closing his eyes in sadness. "I never even got to say good-bye to my baby girl..." he softly murmured.

Dr. Bradley offered his sincerest condolences and left the couple, who were still understandably grieving the loss of their only child after all these years. Every parent's nightmare, terribly come true...

Once back in Indianapolis, Mark immediately called Dr. Reynolds and told her everything that he had learned from Cindi Quinn's parents. "We need to go to Richmond in person, Anita, and tell Ross and his care team the whole story!" he announced. Dr. Reynolds then quickly phoned Sable Beaufort and told her about Cindi's fatal cancer diagnosis being the most probable cause of her committing suicide. "Oh my God! I never even knew she was dying!" Sable exclaimed in shock.

The next day -- a hot and humid Sunday in early August -- Mark, Anita, Deena, and Martin met with Ross in a private conference room. Dr. Bradley told Helman the whole story.

"So you see, Ross, your break-up with Cindi was not the actual cause of her suicide. It was her fear of having a painful, futile struggle with cancer. She just couldn't bear it, so she ended her own life. You needn't fear the words 'sleeping pills' anymore. That was the panic 'trigger' of your neurosis."

Helman, stunned, felt like a huge weight was lifted off his mind. It was not my fault, he slowly realized! I can regret my callus actions in my relationship with Cindi and mourn her loss of life, but I am innocent in causing her death, he now believed. But he vowed to himself to be extra careful in all potential future relationships with women. He had learned a hard lesson. A deeper understanding of feelings, trust, honesty, and compassion were more important than just having casual dating sex.

Ross had a final question, however, for the four doctor panel. "Could my rejection of Cindi in ending our relationship have somehow caused her cancer to appear and spread? You know, the stress on her health and all after we broke up?"

Dr. Subret answered for the panel. "No, Ross. She was probably asymptomatically ill even before you first started dating her. That is how cancer develops in stages and spreads."

Because he had two more weeks in his three-month hospital treatment agreement, Ross (with the encouragement of all four doctors) decided to stay and heal some more. His demeanor dramatically changed. His appetite improved. He was energetic and upbeat in his now enthusiastic participation in group therapy sessions. He spoke of soon trying to reconnect with his estranged parents and his two brothers. Everyone remarked how he smiled more readily. Even his ward floor orderly, Carl, noticed the changes. "You are going to make it, my friend!" he exclaimed. "And I knew you would too. There is sunshine back in your soul, praise the Lord!"

After he was officially discharged from Richmond State Hospital by director Paul Roebuck and had collected his personal effects, a County van drove him back to his studio apartment in Indianapolis. That evening, a relaxed and refreshed Ross Helman got a phone call from Bob Brinker, his old supervisor at Tom Wood Ford.

"Hey, welcome back, good buddy! Dr. Bradley just gave me a call with the good news. Say..if you're interested, I've got a sweet job waiting just for you. Seems that we really need an experienced automotive computer diagnostic technician. My other guy up and quit...went back to Kentucky. Well, how 'bout it, Ross? You ready to return?"

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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