

## Crossed Paths

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Both men were of the rural South, veterans admitted days apart to the locked ward. They were haunted with demons. We didn't speak of demons, of course. We confidently invoked tiny unfindable molecules that swamped lives, filled persons, stole their souls. Demons sounded close enough to me.

The resemblance ended there. One was old, the other young; one loud, the other quiet. One had a future, the other just a past. Their paths crossed each others and mine, but they never met.

The old man arrived screaming. Carried by his family, he was cradled to a matted cell. There he lay wailing, thrashing, begging death. White shirt, open necked, collar painted with tears. Belt slipped gently from striped dark slacks. Stockings left on feet. As a young student, heir to Puritans, I cringed, a voyeur, peeping through the lower corner of the door window at this large, not fat, graying grandfather, dusted with dignity even as he writhed.

The young man walked in mute. After teaching high school for a while, he simply stopped talking. Clothes neatly placed, peaceful faced, sitting in the sunny dayroom, maybe watching TV, relaxed. Eye contact easy, cooperation gentle, just no words until we poisoned with medications the one part of his brain that was working to keep his mouth shut. That part might have known the rest was out of whack, told the rest to keep quiet until this blew over. But we wouldn't let it blow over. We dripped truth serum, smiling, into his veins, waiting for his heart to pump it to the "keep quiet!" part of the brain, to numb and shut it down. His words then flowed, disconnected, loose, tangential, psychotic. They didn't stop when the barbiturate faded. The rest of his brain overran the keep quiet part, unleashed by our poison.

The old man got better. He had taken medicine to lower blood pressure and shelter him from strokes. Instead, the medication caused him

to become so severely depressed that he desperately sought death. But as the reserpine wore off, so did the pain. The control part of his brain regained command. His death wish disappeared along with the unseen reserpine molecules. He pulled on belt, tie, coat, and walked home tired, arms around his children. His path turned back to nurture his family after his doctor, hoping to help his blood pressure, nearly killed him.

The young man, on the other hand, stopped all eye contact. Listening to voices inside, he no longer heard ours. His path stopped in the care of strangers.

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