

[Confined to Quarters](#) [1]

May 1, 2017 [Memoir](#) [2]

[Illness](#) [3]

[Into Sanity](#) [4]

Personal Essay by Marianne Goldsmith

The People Who Show Up



First light, dim light, cold. Warming Jerry's right hand in my left, his rough, calloused fingers laced between mine. Moving in closer, we line up on the long, broad walkway, bordered on both sides by curved railings and blue garbage cans.

[1] *Santa Rita Jail, aka the Greystone Hotel, is "considered a 'mega-jail' and ranks as the third largest facility in California." It is further distinguished as the first jail in the country to build its own smart grid. Visiting hours on Saturday for units 1–4: 8 to 11 a.m.*

We woke in the dark. Hot coffee, cold bread, sour breath.

[2] *Visitors: Be there early or miss the first cutoff.*

I know women who spent time here years ago, political activists, arrested for protesting the Vietnam War. Some served time on weekends so they could hold on to their day jobs.

Not so for Daniel, son of Jerry (both pseudonyms), in November 2007. Off his meds, Daniel went to a bar, got spooked, and lost his temper. The man he injured has since recovered. Judge offered time in a group home, but Daniel said no. He's in jail for three months. Won't take his meds. He asked to see me.

This place looks like a suburban cinema multiplex surrounded by walls of salmon pink and neat, tiered lawns of emerald green. Stadium lights on thin poles have been planted amid clusters of dark-red plum trees. Our ramp cuts through the middle, leading up to the entrance: an arched, white portico flanked by uniformed guards.

Jerry drops my hand, pats his jacket pocket, pulls out the sports page he grabbed just before we left. He grins, pointing to the cover shot, a pair of quarterbacks caught in mid-air chase. He licks his lower lip, frowning, pulls out his handkerchief, blotting a crusty cold sore. He breaks out every time there's trouble with Daniel. When we married, my friends brought a house-warming gift and asked me what it's like to be a stepmother. "Look up," I said, pointing to fingerprints streaked across the ceiling. That was tall, long-legged Daniel, watching a ball game with Jerry, leaping, whooping to high-five the ceiling when his team scored. That was Daniel, before his break. Before college, too many drugs.

Last week, Jerry drove to Santa Rita, waited his turn, got all the way to the Mental Health unit, but Daniel wouldn't see him. Could happen again. Only now, we know better. Instead of instant panic over unanswered emails and phone calls, we can wait. If no one in the family, including his mother and brother, hears anything for 24 hours, we check his place. Longer than 48 hours, we decide whether to call the cops and file a Missing Persons report.

Our best teachers are the families in our support group. During the first year of Daniel's break, in the late 1990s, we faithfully sat in Thursday evening sessions, telling our stories, listening to theirs. Unless you were a "consumer" (patient), you could not give advice. We talked about schizophrenia, mood disorder meds, side effects. We traded books and articles about mental illness. Yes, I got smarter. But I was still frustrated, furious with Daniel, watching as the disease bounced him around, in and out of paranoia, jabbering monologues, falling into sorry depression. I was frightened by how helpless and exhausted we were, caught up in this undertow.

Now, I watch Jerry move in and out of his own fog. He isn't ready to change his storyline for the child he nurtured with his ex, to let go of the bright wide-open world they wanted for him.

"Hey you," I nudge. "Apple?" I drop a slice of fruit from my bag into his palm. He kisses my hand, eats the apple, and goes back to the sports page.

About my dilemma, it's been long and messy, many fifty-minute hours sitting with my therapist, patiently pulling apart and putting back together what I can and can't do. What is out of my hands, irrevocable. I set up a separation, a kind of hyphenated space, between my life and Daniel's. From that place, I can see him.

Jerry says the deputies let in one hundred people at a time. From here to the entrance, I'd say we're about eightieth in line. I'm looking around at all the women here. Clearly, we outnumber the men. The younger ones look under or barely over twenty, Hispanic or African American. I watch them pacing back and forth, a bit wobbly, balancing on their toes in their high-heeled boots as they hover over cell phones. They wear butt-cheek-hugging jeans and short jackets with fur-trimmed hoods. Some mothers have brought their children, who tag after them, zigzagging, bopping around, staring at strangers, like me. Babies are bundled up in strollers or held over the shoulder, small sleepy faces yawning, peering out of bubble-gum pink or lime-green blankets.

[3] *"No food or drink is permitted in the visiting areas. Visitors will be allowed to bring one(1) diaper and one baby bottle(1) into the visiting area."*

I'm chewing on my sweet apple, surveying the crowd on the opposite side of the ramp. A set of regulars are camped

out there, many settled in portable chairs, wrapped in fleece blankets, wearing thick socks and running shoes. Directly across from us, a woman sits wrapped up in red fleece with a textbook on her lap, highlighting text with a yellow marker.

A few yards ahead, two African American men in watch caps stand around holding coffee cups, shrouded in black-and-white Oakland Raiders blankets stamped with the face of the team pirate, a player wearing an eye patch. One tall guy—he's got to be over six feet—strolls around covered in a pink Pooh bear throw.

"Why can't she give us something we need?" the woman in front of me, a middle-aged blonde, complains to her friend, an African American woman around the same age. "I put all that stuff from my mother in the closet. I swear, it's all brand new, still in the box. Waffle iron, blender, toaster oven."

I shoot a sideways look at Jerry, but he's still reading.

The woman is outfitted in snow-white running shoes and a turquoise velveteen jogging suit, arms folded across her chest, hands under armpits. "I keep telling her, 'Stop bringing us this shit.'"

"I hear you." Her friend nods and zips up her blue parka, shoving her hands in the pockets.

The woman carefully lifts the soft hood of her jacket up over the lacquered curls. Her cheeks are smoothed in rosy make-up, lips glossy pale pink, eyebrows surgically penciled in dark-brown strokes, eyelids shadowed, lashes stiff with black mascara. "I mean, who needs more than one toaster oven? I'm running out of room."

She kneels down to retie the laces on her shoe. As she straightens, she looks me over, my lumpy profile, black quilted jacket, floppy pants, flat walking shoes. We nod, trade smiles as if we were old friends. We know who we are, the women who show up. Whatever, whenever.

From my mother, I learned how to show up, the practice of *bikur cholim* (visiting the sick). In Jewish tradition, it is said, the visit removes a small piece of the illness from the afflicted. Would that it were so.

A trio of small birds hops lightly along the pavement. Seconds later, they're off, chased by wiggly kids pursued by mothers, mincing after them in their spindly shoes, weaving through the crowd.

Sky brightens. Doors open. Our line moves forward. A steady, rumbling noise comes from one of the camp chairs. Can't tell who is buried inside the dark hooded parka and blanket, snoring peacefully.

A deputy appears, making his way through the line, handing out forms. Jerry takes one, fills in the blanks with Daniel's name, his PFN—Personal File Number.

The huge lobby has high industrial ceilings, black-and-gray walls, and a gleaming white floor reeking of piney cleanser. Before I store my bag in a locker, I grab a smudged pocket mirror, pick at shreds of leftover apple between my teeth. I'm not surprised by my washed-out, freckled face, puffy eyes, but I pull out a tube of lipstick and dab a bit of coral over my mouth, grab my brush and run it through my hair.

After inspection, we pass through the metal detector and follow the crowd down a long beige corridor, under cold fluorescent light, until we reach the Mental Health pod. At the glassed-in booth, the guard takes our paperwork.

We're back to waiting with the others. I reach for Jerry's hand, and we slump against the wall. I notice a little round camera nestled above the guard station. Should I wave?

Jerry wants a good visit, a peaceful visit. He broods and grows snappy whenever Daniel lands in the hospital or goes missing. One night, I woke when I heard Jerry weeping, switched on the light. I rubbed his back slowly. He turned and looked at me. "I love my son," he said. "I don't know how to help him." Without his glasses, his blue eyes seemed so much smaller; he looked so defeated.

We miss the Daniel we knew, the sweet, depth-charging, wide-angle, whimsical explorer. What holds him unseen from us, in shadow?

On Saturdays, I go to the synagogue. During the Torah service, I stand when the rabbi asks for names of those who need healing:

[4] *Prayer: May the Holy One overflow with compassion upon him, to restore him, to heal him, to strengthen him....*

After half an hour, the guards tell us they are notifying inmates of their visitors. I can't stand around any longer. I wander up and down the long bright corridor. Last time I saw Daniel, he was in court for his arraignment.

We take turns sending short letters and notes. Mine are basically weather reports, film or book reviews. Once in awhile, Daniel will send a letter in penciled, jagged handwriting that makes sense up to a point, as if the writer had difficulty translating the news from too many voices talking at once.



On my second round of up-down pacing, I discover an interior window with a view of the visiting room. The space is divided into an open area for visitors and a row of three glassed-in booths, each with an empty chair for the inmate and a telephone receiver. On the visitor's side, there's a chair, a waist-high ledge, and a corresponding receiver on each partition wall.

Round three. I can see Daniel through the window, sitting behind the glass in the far left booth. He looks up and sees me waving. He tilts his head, gives me a tight, pained smile. He looks calm, clean-shaven: a buzz-cut scalp, his round face pale, his broad shoulders slumped in a dark-green uniform. I motion to Jerry, and he comes to the window, waves stiffly at Daniel.

[5] *Advice: "Remind yourself that your loved one has an illness, not a character flaw, and it is not anyone's fault."*

We hear our names called. We push through the heavy door.

Jerry stands against the back wall of the room. I am seated at the booth. I raise the telephone receiver, looking into Daniel's dark eyes. As soon as we begin to speak, it's clear between us. We almost manage to cut through the glass.

Publishing Information

- Note [1]: Quote and paraphrased summary from "The New Santa Rita Jail" and "SRJ Visiting

Confined to Quarters

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Schedule,” [Alameda County Sheriff's Office website](#) [5].

- Note [2]: Based on advice for visiting inmates from an online chat room.
- Note [3]: Quote from “Visiting Rules and Regulations,” [Alameda County Sheriff's Office website](#) [6].
- Note [4]: English translation from Jewish prayer for healing, *R'fuah shlemah*; see “[Jewish Prayer for the Sick: Mi Sheberakh](#) [7]” by Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, *My Jewish Learning*.
- Note [5]: Quote from “[A Family Guide to Psychiatric Hospitalization](#) [8],” Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA) website.

Art Information

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