

N.R. Robinson

Visiting Mama

Granddad Cavazos did not drive what he said was his “usual Sunday scenic route”: through downtown DC and past the sign-shaking Vietnam protesters fronting LBJ’s White House. Instead, he hooked a right from Randolph Place onto North Capital Street. We motored over the Eleventh Street Bridge and up Nichols Avenue southeast, past groups huddled around bus stops and streaming from Catholic and Baptist and AME churches. My six-year-old sister, Cookie, stared out at the hubbub. Because no single thing would hold still in my eight-year-old head, I clenched my eyes and studied the glowing red of my inner eyelids.

That winter morning of 1964, during Cookie’s and my first visit to Mama’s new home, my grandparents seemed in high spirits. Granddad whistled affably while Grandma tripped over her skinny lips.

“Way back when, it was called The Government Hospital for the Insane,” she said. “Your Mama’s doctor said it was the world’s first an’ largest; over a hundred thousand locked away—all types of crazy I never heard of.”

As Cookie and I slouched in the backseat four-eyeing her, Grandma’s pinky moved across the pamphlet, “Manic depressive an’ phobics; psychotics, paranoids an’ schizophrenics. She sounded out, “Dis-so-ci-a-tive sickness.”

“What kinda’ sick is Mama?” I asked, excited under my affected carelessness.

If Grandma heard me, she didn’t acknowledge it. Following her own thoughts, “The doctors give ‘em counsel’n.’ But, if you ask me, ain’t no way to fix ‘em.”

As we approached a sun-blazed entry, she sighed, “He said they can’t get enough nurses or doctors. Must be why them nutjobs is all nasty and beat up the way they is.”

At a gate set into a ribbon of twelve-foot-high brick wall, a weathered bronze plaque announced, “Saint Elizabeth’s Hospital est. 1855.” Behind the gate, carved paths crisscrossed a vast assembly of snow-laden buildings. There was something unexpectedly idyllic, even Oz-like, about the frosted village behind the forbidding wall. But I was so amped up, Mama was all I could think about.

The four of us marched up the snowflake-covered walkway, my rubber-soled sneakers slipping as I took in Mama’s home. Like many of Saint Elizabeth’s buildings, hers was redbrick stacked gothic. The structure had a tall center turret sandwiched between two smaller towers with crenellations along the top—a forbidding fortress. In the enormous keep-like lobby, the guard looked up from his *Jet Magazine*, one of Grandma’s favorites. After registering our names, he grunted into his rotary handset then nodded at an antique elevator. We jerked and juddered up then spilled into a cube of a hallway. A small rectangular wall-sign read, *Ward 3*. Granddad pushed the single button set into the frame of the windowless door and we waited.

My stomach shrank, prompted by a fecal odor mixed with urine and Pine-Sol. The biotic stench crept beneath the door along with the sounds of screams and manic laughter, igniting a fear in me that persisted through the clanking of the lock turning and the heavy door swinging open. We were greeted by a half-circle of adults swarming like an audience settling in to watch some unintentional theater: faces expressionless, or smeared with laughter or sorrow; old, young, male, female faces; Caucasians and Black folk all sporting pale-green hospital gowns. The door opener, a wet-sand-colored man with Orderly-in-Charge sewn across the breast of his white jacket, shooed the group: “Get on now! Go on back to your biz’ness or you ain’t getting no cig’rettes.”

As the group scattered, I took in the cavernous room in which we were standing. To the front and right sat a chest-high counter

behind which the two other white-jackets casually lounged. The very casualness of those uniformed men in that chaotic setting exuded a certain authority, a sense of inevitability. The nearest white-jacket nodded toward a corner where sunlight pushing through a barred window illuminated a ratty brown davenport and matching easy chair. That part of the room lay before a long hallway punched with cave-like doorways.

The very air stood at attention. When Mama emerged from one of the caves, the Orderly in-Charge was guiding her. His knobby fingers encircling Mama's pale slender arm, the orderly whispered what I imagined were encouragements as she shuffled toward us in a gait different from the light prance we'd known. Her chestnut hair was electric looking; her pale skin was paler. The same green hospital gown, tie-strings dangling over exposed buttocks, hung from her thinner than usual frame. Mama's typically animated *face* was as expressionless as the one on a nickel. Incredibly—incredible because it's difficult to convey how this could be true—Mama was still beautiful.

What was beautiful about Mama was the stately manner with which she tried to right herself when she stumbled. And how she struggled to keep her sagging head erect. The way she maintained the slipping gown on her still elegant shoulders. Mama was beautiful in the way that she, in spite of the conditions, tried to maintain dignity and a sense of independence.

"Madeline, you be good," the orderly said with a plugged-in sort of grin. "I'll be back to get you in a few." He winked familiarly at her, then us, before turning and joining the other white-jackets chatting it up back at the nurse-less nurse's station.

Cookie threw her head and shoulders into Mama, "M—, M—, Mommy!"

A grimace in her typically sturdy voice, Grandma barked, "Cheechee, why you walkin' round here half naked like you ain't got no home trainin'?"

Sturdy because strength was the backbone of Grandma's existence. "Life is hard. Ya gotta be hard back at it," was her credo.

Persistently angry at her daughter's unforgiveable illness, Grandma seemed to have forgotten her caution about the antipsychotics and electric shock involved in Mama's treatment.

Throughout the orderly's instructions, Cookie's hugging and crying, and Grandma's chiding, Mama stood immobile, as if an invisible membrane sheltered her from the surrounding chaos. Perched at the edge of the easy chair, I watched, torn between wanting to run from Mama and needing to bury my face in her small bosom. This was when Mama looked up and her eyes locked with mine. Even with their new fearfulness, they were the eyes I'd always known. Her anxious but steady gaze shifted down to where Cookie clutched at her gown.

"Hi babies" Mama muttered, her voice soft and garbled.

It had been a year since we'd seen one another. A lifetime is how it seemed. Though I felt the pressure of Mama's gaze, at that vital instant I could not bring her into focus. After months of missing her, Mama was reduced to wiggles floating like bugs in a toilet.

Abruptly, I could not feel the front of my face, my arms and legs. What I felt was a blizzard brewing in my eight-year-old brain. This chaos in my head was what Mama called "Nicky's fits." Instigated by being face-to-face with Mama, whom I had humiliated into leaving us. Whom I'd driven mad with my unruliness. I blamed myself for Mama's incarceration.

"Planet earth to Nicky," said Grandma, voice distant, then devolving, along with Cookie's joyous sobs, into meaningless molded sounds.

Resist the urge. Don't pee yourself!

It was as if a grizzly bear had been loosed in the ward. I was petrified by the possibility of a nonverbal blaming by Mama. What if she walked away? Love and silver slugs of anxiety and resentment and fear swelled in my brain. "Satan's little helper," Grandma often taunted me. That day, I felt more guilty than bad, but as mad as Mama and her wardmates in their madhouse, my own to-be-discovered insanity skulking inside me. I conjured all this and more.

Mama slipped on that absurd-during-good-times smile of hers and the spell disintegrated. Just like that, the grizzly quieted. I could almost feel the rush of my blood slowing, the pain in my head up in smoke as my watery vision receded.

Looming in my line of sight: Mama and Cookie in an incomplete embrace. Their free arms outstretched toward me. Short-breathed, the desire for Mama overcoming my fight with fear, I entered their embrace. Feeling the arrangement of them—the order of skin over muscle and bone—I surrendered to the pounding of Mama’s and Cookie’s hearts against my own. All the missing pieces of our little family puzzle locked together in a swaying three-way hug. At long last, reunited with Mama.

Photographs



Fig. 1: Better times—Christmas at the Cavazos’ ~1961. Back Row: Junior, Lil, Pat. Middle Row: Mama (the eldest, with necklace), Tony, Butch, Grandma, Manny, Mike, and Cookie. Front Row: Nicky (looking at Mama)



Fig 2: Granddad Cavazos



Fig 3: Mama, Saint E's.



Fig 4: Cookie (center w/ glasses), Elementary School

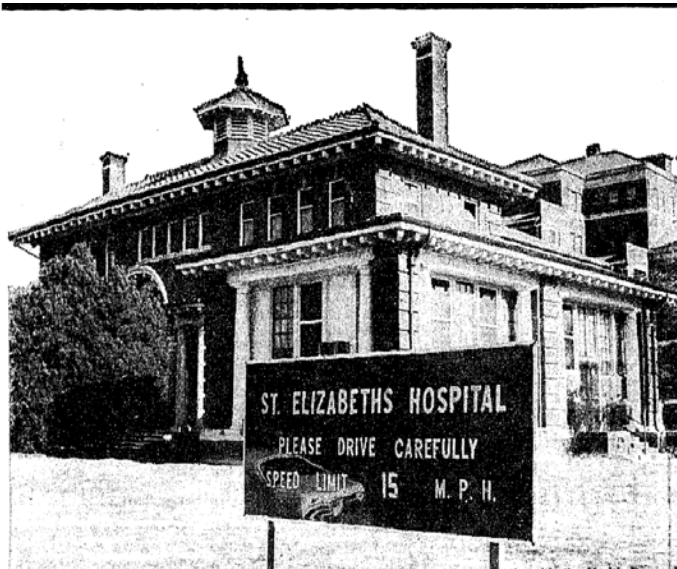


Fig 5: St. Elizabeth's Hospital



Fig. 6: Saint Elizabeth's Hospital Predecessor Institution—The Government Hospital for the Insane

Over the next year, as Gemini 5 was orbiting the planet, Cookie and I swung back and forth between Saint E's and the welter of

the Cavazos's, a place where days were so unpredictable and like any other that time passed with great texture. It was late afternoon when we headed out to see Mama that early winter of '65: into the New Jersey Avenue tunnel, up onto the Southeast Freeway, over the 11th Street Bridge and down Nichols. Turning into the entrance, we were greeted by the same weathered bronze plaque.

Granddad stood, stiff, before that same windowless door. Nine-year-old me fidgeted as Cookie squeezed my hand.

Grandma muttered, "Don't know why these people always take so damn long!"

I blanched at the now-familiar stench. The screams and manic laughter still generated a snowballing fear within me. I was terrified that I'd become a ticking timebomb, that whatever had touched Mama was budding within me, that I'd be *committed* to St. E's someday. Me, locked in a ward like this one.

When we'd first visited Mama, I'd barely contained my excitement. Lately, I visited reluctantly. As visiting day approached, anxiety and agitation built, through the weekend and then during the Sunday drive. By the time we topped the crest, my apprehension was unbearable.

The four of us pushed through the Babel of voices into the now expected swarm.

The mama who emerged from the doorway on this visit was escorted by the same orderly. In the frank fluorescent light, Mama grinned widely when she saw us. Abruptly, like a page ripped from a comic book, Mama seemed changed: an imperfect version of her year-younger self. Why hadn't she wiped the rivulets of sweat from her forehead, and from the short dark hairs growing above her lip? When Mama squeezed me tight, hot stink rose from her armpits.

"My baby," she sang, then squeezed me closer. As Cookie tearfully hugged what was left of her, Mama announced to the group clotting around us, "Everybody, this here's my nine-year-old, Nicky. Ain't he a doll?"

Cookie's face, inches below mine, was scarlet with love. For so long, it seemed, Cookie and I had lapped Mama's devotion like rich

cream. This day, I burned with humiliation—our Mama at home in the ward. I felt the weight of her insanity: her speaking to the crazies as if they were extended family at a backyard barbecue or cheerful neighbors dropping by. I could hear the orderlies chortling. Their laughter was a hammer. I pulled from Mama's grasp and away from the swarm.

"Grandma, can I wait downstairs?"

"What's wrong with you boy? Go be with your Mama."

I glanced around. Mama was busy introducing Cookie to a group of crazies. When she threw back her curls and loosed a wild laugh, I could see silver gray molars and a pink fleshy teardrop at the back of her throat.

Did Mama's mental illness blossom from an adult version of my own *acting out*? Because a feeling is a feeling and cannot be reasoned with, I'd decided that my path to sanity was "unemotion." I'd deduced that strongmindedness—control over anger, melancholy, and yes, fear—was the key to mental health. So, tamping down my dread, I assumed a façade of calm.

"Stop," I wanted to shout at Mama, "Stop that nonsense!" Instead, I turned away—shoulders hunched, eyes to the ground—mortified. Mama was locked away in this place.

I burned at the sight of her, treated like a madwoman by people who knew about these sorts of things, and at the prospect of these people seeing me the same way. How could she have done this to herself, and to us? How could she have tried to die?

Peals of Mama's high-pitched laughter unfurled through the screened and barred windows.

"She didn't mean it," Cookie said to me, as if responding to my desire to leave. Cookie could always read my expressions, could almost read my mind. She still believed in Mama. Two years older and wiser, I knew better.

While living with the Cavazos's, my need for Mama had morphed into sudden tantrums, fistfights with schoolmates, a sour silence my response to the nuns' reprimands. I had grown sick of Saint Martin's Elementary, a place where I'd learned I could gobble a

page, a figure, a rule, consume whole chapters in a fraction of the time it took my classmates. A place I'd been appreciated and that I had appreciated.

Just turned nine, I understood suicide. I'd made meaning from my earlier memories of Mama: body and bones in bra and slip at an odd angle off the side of the unmade bed; laid flat as a playing card on the bathroom tile, empty prescription bottle clasped in her hand. Incidents we kept close because, as Mama said, *Our problems ain't nobody's biz'ness*. Images sealed in stereoscope: me, dialing 0 for the operator; confused Cookie and me watching the sirening ambulance whisk Mama away.

That evening, eyes riveted to my face, as if reading the pain in my eyes, Cookie stammered, "She didn't actually d-d-do it."

But Mama had *tried*. She had tried to do it. Because of luck or circumstance or ineptitude, she had not been successful courting death. But what if she had been?

I saw dead animals all the time. Stray dogs and wild coons flattened like pancakes on DC streets, lying lifelessly, regarding the round world one-dimensionally, their innards splattered, a star-spangled declaration of death. Even cats, with their supposed nine lives, were mere mortals.

I recalled watching a klatch of boys catch an alley cat in a burlap sack. Just funning, they set the sack on fire. The cat—writhing, keening, indefatigably alive—fought violently to escape the fiery trap until the sack lay still. I sometimes wondered why Mama had not done what that cat and all the lowliest creatures on the planet did every day—fight to live.

Somewhere in the ward, from a nearby television, came a familiar voice: *I Dream of Jeannie's* Jeannie playfully demanded that her love interest and 'master,' Tony, take her on a picnic, "Or I'll find another more appreciative master!"

This ultimatum interrupted by Mama's plea: "Nicky, come give your Mama some sugar?"

Both Jeannie and Mama wore their hair long and straight. Perhaps because Jeannie enjoyed a level of influence that Mama did not, I turned and looked at Cookie instead.

As if performing another of her mindreading stunts, Cookie stuttered, “M-Mama’s better. She ain’t gonna try again.” The new moonlight settled in trembling spheres through the bars giving tone and texture to her words.

Gray plastic trays, like those used mealtimes at school, lay scattered about the ward. These familiar objects in that strange and frightening place were somehow discouraging. Taking in my change in expression, “Ma-Mama loves us,” Cookie said. Then glancing over at Mama. “She loves you more than me.”

It seemed eons later when the Orderly-in-Charge, slanting toward us, said through his plugged-in grin: “About that time, fam’ly. One hour’s the rule.”

Mama mumbled something back.

“What you say, Madeline? I didn’t hear you.”

Mama repeated herself, but with something more and something else in her voice. I set myself forward to catch her words:

“Excuse me, sir. Did you take your turn with me yet?” she said, eyes wide, innocent.

With Mama’s risen voice, an unnatural quiet seemed to descend upon the room, the ward’s whole voltage changed.

The orderly paused, as if he was picturing what Mama was saying. Shaking his head and laughing nervously, he said, “Madeline, what you talking about?”

“You know ... takin’ your turn,” Mama replied, replying herself into boldness.

“Why you gonna ask me something like that?” hissed the orderly, abruptly looking around at us, her family, his shoulders shrugging as if to say, “Ain’t she crazy?”

As if he wanted to beat the idea of Mama’s craziness upside our heads.

“Madeline, you gonna give folks the wrong impression.”

Granddad and Grandma stared, at first puzzled, until embarrassment crept fully across their faces. They never said or did anything.

They did not say or do anything.

“What?” I asked, elbowing Cookie.

“What?” Cookie said to me.

Looking back, I might have seen the nature of it in their eyes: the orderly’s—greedy, eager. And behind Mama’s wide-open gates, a combination of fear and shock. She had stepped into a land only she knew, or so it seemed to me.

We were still *what-ting*, lips pressed together in a flat line, as the orderly pulled Mama to her feet. Then, gripping her slender arm, the orderly half walked, half dragged Mama down the darkened hall.

Dry-eyed the silent ride home, I relived images of the orderly dragging Mama: her body, light, almost substanceless, as if she was not really there. My spirit, aggrieved, was revisited by shame: *What Mama said, and we left her behind?*

Wrapping my arms around myself, I felt my blood racing, rivulets trapped underground, fed by the indefinable happenings between the sand-colored man and Mama. Fidgeting, my hands slapped and punched the dry leather seats. The inside of the car was inhumanly hot.

I watched a bud of guilt flower and then fly, around the cramped interior of the hurtling automobile and through the rear window. Watched it rise in the darkened sky and wing round the city before wheeling back to earth where it circled then reentered the car. I felt the guilt anchor itself within me. Saw it settle into the furrowing brows and pursed lips of Grandma and Grandad Cavazos. And even lay itself, like a blanket, onto the clenched frame of seven-year-old Cookie, who pretended to sleep.

“Visiting Mama” was the winner in the 2022 Patty Friedmann Writing Competition’s CNF category.