

CHANNEL 5

SHORT STORY

Summer At Tooting Bec

Last summer **Ian Kelly** spent several months in psychiatric hospital after attempting suicide

Arrival It is hard to describe entry to psychiatric hospital - I was carried in horizontal. The nurses watched me closely, aware that I had made repeated attempts at suicide.

The Wall In May 1987, I had swallowed 200 paracetamol tablets. Nineteen hours later, I was found by my sister beside a pool of vomit and bile. I had survived my third overdose in three weeks.

There is no tangible reason for what I did. Nothing had gone wrong in my life. I had close support from family and friends, I had a comfortable flat to live in, I had a secure job to return to. All that I suffered from was the illness of depression.

The depression was like a childhood memory. As a child, I was lured and fascinated by a high stone wall. The idea gradually formed that I would have to jump from that wall. Each day I would return and, full of fear, gaze down from the top of the wall, wondering if there was anyone who would dare to jump, wondering if I would dare to jump. The idea became an obsession. I jumped, to conquer the nightmare, and landed, shaken but not hurt.

The bottles of paracetamol were like the wall, I was overwhelmed by the fear that, to conquer the nightmare, I would swallow the pills. Each day I would return home and, full of anxiety, imagine the pills in my hand. The act itself came as a relief. There were no more decisions to make. At last I could rest.

I did not want to die but I had decided that the desire for rest would mean hospitalisation or death. Now I am able to accept what I did as being part of an illness. I am alive and well, though some-

times I taste the pills in my mouth. The taste is bitter, like the memory.

Impressions I was afraid when I entered psychiatric hospital. I tried to ease that fear by seeking acceptance from the nurses and other patients. We each had our own difficulties.

Delroy was a talented schizophrenic patient. He was a streetwise guy who wanted to fly his plane. He was one of the many interesting patients I met.

There was Neville, soft spoken, checking everyone was okay and searching for his cash. There was Grant, playing his ghetto blaster and fiddling with stunted fingers. These patients were black and working class. Their names have been changed, so has their identity.

Paul was a gentle artist whose work had been displayed in the Tate Gallery. He and many of the other alcoholics were fighters. Jim said: 'I've fallen into a pit but I'm scrabbling to get out'. I knew I was in the same pit, but above me were support ropes. I was lucky.

Many of the white patients were racist. Some, despite their background, wanted the Conservatives to win the general election. They were influenced by a paper that showed someone jump to their death from Beachy Head and which contained pictures of women with large breasts. *The Guardian* was not considered a newspaper. It was read by the 'student'.

John liked to listen to his radio. He left and committed suicide. Mary was an Irish traveller. She wanted children, from anybody. Angela was a brave woman. She had lost a child in a cot death. She broke down when someone



graffitied 'baby killer' on her door. Linda tried to help her. She was depressed, but concerned and articulate.

Eddie used to steal, all the time. Chris used to gamble and swear, all the time. Kofi had jumped from a window and broken both feet. In his efforts to recover, he discovered religion. Peter had the worst injuries. He attempted suicide with a chainsaw. Then, after an overdose, his stomach ulcer burst. He cut his wrists, so did Ben. I was the third - we compared cuts.

The dawn chorus began at six am. Robbie tried to goosestep and find the German SS. Eddie began to steal.

The former DHSS official swung from the bedpost. Tom used to sing, 'Oh what a beautiful morning'. It was hard to sleep. These people had problems, but they were not mad.

I returned to normal life and waited at Stockwell tube. I was attacked. It was hard to tell who had come from psychiatric hospital. It is often hard to tell. But many people think they know. How much do they know?

Patients' Rights During my last weeks in hospital, I tried to persuade other patients that we should hold meetings to discuss issues on



the ward. It was already a progressive ward. Every Friday there was a meeting of patients and nurses. Some patients would say they were feeling well, others would say the food was bad. The nurses would say that too many teabags were being taken from the kitchen. This was the patients' meeting.

I thought there was more to patients' rights. I had been willingly placed on a three-day section order, which meant that I had to remain in hospital and accept any medication offered. But when I became a voluntary patient once more, I regained the right to refuse medica-

tion. One nurse did not know that I had come off section. She did not like me discussing nurses and doctors with other patients. She asked me to take a tranquilliser called largactil. There is no difference between largactil and a mallet. Both knock you out. I did not want to be hit with a mallet. I refused the treatment.

The incident made me angry. After talking to other patients, I suggested an agenda for a patients' rights meeting. One item was 'the rights of voluntary patients'. The nurse who liked largactil did not like this. She tore the agenda down. I put up

another copy and the meeting went ahead.

The first few meetings were not a success. Most of the discussion was about property and food disappearing. Some patients were critical of an agenda that had been forced on them. They were right, I admitted later. Eventually, it was agreed to use a suggestions list and finish with a round-robin discussion. It worked fine. Many of the comments were negative, but the patients no longer seemed afraid to talk. Often the patients would just thank the nurses for what they had decided. Some nurses could not understand

this. Why discuss something that had already been decided? They did not consider the patients' view to matter.

About half the nurses saw the patients' rights meetings as a threat. The rest of the staff saw it as positive - they felt that care and administration should begin with the patient. The obstacles could be addressed later.

I devised a game called 'Psychopoly', a form of psychiatric Monopoly. The players were consultants. Instead of buying property, they bought drugs, and invested in pills and injections. The aim was to bankrupt the NHS. The Electric Company was the ECT clinic. Mayfair was Harley Street. Park Lane was largactil. Old Kent Road was alcohol.

The charge nurse did not consider the game therapeutic. It was banned. I often wonder why.

The Ticket Attendant Before this period of activity, I had made another attempt at suicide. I fled the ward, went to Oxford Street, bought 100 paracetamol tablets, then ate them in the sunshine in Hyde Park. I sat in a deck-chair, and after a while the ticket attendant came to collect twenty pence. I handed it over, meek as a lamb. I was expecting to die but I knew the ticket attendant was only doing his job, so I said nothing. The bizarre nature of that moment remains with me. Sometimes I laugh about it.

A Normal Conversation I have recovered from my mental illness. I would like to admit to the experience as part of normal conversation. Otherwise, I will be left with the exile of a nightmare.

But it is hard to talk about mental illness. I need to overcome not only my own shame, but also the fears held by most 'normal' people. When the barriers to conversation disappear, it is not only the mentally-ill person who benefits. I cherish those moments. #

At the time of going to press we heard the sad news that Ian Kelly had committed suicide.