

First Day

It was 1966. I drove my VW bug onto Admiral Nimitz highway in Berkeley. From the corner of my eye, I could see driftwood sculptures stuck in the mud along the shoreline. There was a wooden man in the water with outstretched hands. There was a huge sunburst flower made of old timbers. As I approached the bridge, the radio played: "Today President Johnson was optimistic about his latest peace mission lead by Secretary of State Dean Rusk."

I punched the button to switch to KFOG rock and roll from San Francisco.

My little car shook from the wind slamming across the Bay Bridge. I held the wheel tightly as the big rigs and diesel trucks clustered and blasted their horns. In my bug, The Rolling Stones were turned up high and the sunroof was cranked open. The bridge fare was \$.50 cents.

Since I was alone, I could talk or sing. I chose to talk to myself.

"I wonder what they'll have me do at the hospital? What does a social work technician do?" I spoke aloud when I was anxious and alone.

I got off the bridge in the City as soon as traffic would allow. My route into San Francisco was along Embarcadero by the bay. After a few miles, I arrived at the Presidio and used a parking lot under a freeway. High overhead was a constant thumping and pounding as traffic headed to the Golden Gate Bridge. The morning commute was still on above me as I stepped from my car out into the sand-covered parking area.

I stood beneath the freeway and wondered if the people driving so fast above me knew what was happening down beneath their road. Here below them, there was a hospital overflowing with wounded soldiers.

I tucked my big sealed brown envelope under my arm and straightened my tie in the side view mirror.

Cap straightened: check.

Jacket brass buttons: check.

A truck parked nearby was unloading a group of prisoners. They were being marched across the road. Each had a large letter "P" painted in white on the back of his denim jacket. I wondered what they had done.

I was not exactly headed for a job interview, but it felt like it. I was clean shaven with a close haircut.

I had no idea where I was headed.

A heavy fog nearly obscured the parking lot. There seemed to be a cluster of one-story wooden barracks. The noise on the freeway above quieted to a constant but softer roar.

I called out to an approaching soldier, dressed in green fatigues. "I just got here. Where is Company Headquarters.?"

"Over there." He gestured. It was obvious from my envelope that I was new. The envelope was like a huge neon sign that said: "NEW GUY."

It was getting colder. The prisoners had spread out in a slightly landscaped area and were working. Helmeted MP Guards with shotguns stood and watched.

I walked carefully, trying not to smudge my spit polished dress shoes in the damp sand. I entered what seemed to be the correct door and found a familiar scene of non-commissioned officers and enlisted men.

Everyone seemed to be smoking. There was a clatter of typing. Records were piled on every desk. There was laughing and cursing. "Fuck" was an adjective, verb and noun. The men in the room wore three kinds of uniforms. There were starched whites, green fatigues, and formal Class A's with a few ribbons and medals.

I was ignored until: "Let me see that?" said a private. He took the envelope and escorted the "new guy" into a more formal office.

Behind a polished, very, very clean desk was Captain Grant, perfectly dressed and groomed with a tailored uniform. Like me, he had short hair.

He looked up. Clearly he didn't want to be bothered by me.

I stood at attention before his desk. "Private Gorodezky reporting"

Lt. Grant seemed impatient as he explained to me,

"There are about 1000 enlisted medics in this hospital. If things go well, you and I will never meet again. You really don't want to get to know me, because I only deal with problems. Do you understand?"

I replied, "Yes, Sir."

A **sergeant** retrieved me and walked me across the grounds into the main hospital maze of corridors to see the **General**.

The **General** sent me off to the **Colonel**.

The **Colonel** sent me off to see the **Sergeant**.

I was being processed into the hospital.

The sergeant, my sergeant, was Chuck Embry. He was **very** tall. Over 7 feet. He bowed defensively as he walked through doorways. He was a black man with lots of stripes showing years of service.

Sergeant Embry smiled, then turned serious.

"You are going to work on Ward S-1. S-1 is our locked psychiatric ward. The building used to be a jail. I work there too, but I am on the **unlocked** side. You will be in the locked area."

I had no reply, but followed as he lead me down the hall. The hall was filled with soldiers with a variety of obvious injuries. Most were orthopedic patients, some on crutches, others with canes. I was probably staring at some of the more elaborate trusses and suspended limb devices that I ever saw this first morning.

We approached two heavy swing doors. I tried to hold a door open for a young man on crutches. He grabbed the door away from me.

"I can do this asshole!" he yelled.

Sergeant Embry smiled: "I guess you won't do that again. These guys have a lot to be angry about. Don't get in their way trying to be helpful."

The Sergeant left the main building and approached the entrance to S-1. It was a separate two story box shaped building made of cinder block. The entrance door was very thick with a small, scratched, Plexiglass port hole window. The pale lime green building had few windows and looked just as Sgt. Embry had described. It looked like a jail.

We waited in a small alcove near the front door. A loud buzzer sounded indicating the door was unlocking. I had never been in a psychiatric unit. My heart raced as I wondered what was behind the door.

Slam. Click. The heavy door closed behind me and Sgt. Embry. We were locked in. Sgt. Embry had not given me a key.

Just inside the door there were five corpsmen dressed in bright white, starched uniforms crouching on the floor.

"Ok, ok, we are going to fix you up." Several Corpsmen talked at once.

They were surrounding a soldier in combat fatigues. The soldier lay on a stretcher, his arms tied down with leather restraints.

The corpsmen unfastened the belts and cuffs from the patient's legs and arms.

"Easy, stand up slowly buddy."

"Here drink some water."

"Hold on to me."

I stood well back against the wall. Sergeant Embrey laughed aloud at my apparent shock and explained, "This is how patients arrive from the hospital in Japan. They really don't need to tie these guys up, but they do since they're afraid of psych patients."

“It wasn’t too long ago that the psych patients had to wear red patient uniforms while all the others wore blue,” he added. “Now everyone wears blue.”

Sergeant Embry continued. “You get this little office,” he said, gesturing to a heavy wooden door. Embry put his hand on my shoulder to guide and reassure me. “Come in here and wait. I’ll come back in a bit.”

The office was quite tiny and had a white ceramic tile floor and tiles half-way up all the 20 foot high walls. I knew it had once been a bathroom. The door to “my” office seemed unusually thick. There was a battered metal desk and two chairs. The walls were solid cement and, like everything, it was painted pale green.

Outside in the hallway, there was a blur of corpsmen and nurses – all in white uniforms. Doctors wore long white coats.

Patients shuffled by in a drugged haze. The new tranquilizer Thorazine was being heavily used. A calendar on my office wall showed a variety of activities including electro convulsive therapy (ECT) every Wednesday morning.

My new little office was near the main door, so there was a constant crush of buzzing, banging and chatter outside in the hall. It turned out that this main door and the front desk was the social center of this small psychiatric ward. Everyone passed through the portal. The sergeant who buzzed people through the door knew everyone and everything.

Inside my office, I closed “my” door. I took off my heavy wool jacket to find my dress shirt was soaking wet. I had the smell of new job anxiety. It seemed I was the only person amongst perhaps 50 personnel who wore a formal “Class A” uniform, which was a dress jacket and wool slacks.

I considered that this was the first time I had ever had even a tiny measure of privacy since being inducted into the Army. I was alone and the thick door made it almost quiet.

I looked toward the ceiling. There were two tiny, barred windows about high above. I realized although I could open my office door, I was locked inside the ward.

I sat at my empty desk. Waiting.

There was a soft knock at the door. Before I could get up, another louder banging knock as the door was pushed open.