

John

I liked John. I got along with most of the clients in the house, but John was the one I'd ask stuff like where's the peanut butter, or how do you think I should describe that incident last night. We'd hang out when it was his turn to cook. Sometimes he'd make real food. He'd borrow my pocket knife to chop garlic--they aren't allowed to keep sharp knives at the house.

As he cooked, I'd sit on the counter smoking and listening to his stories about New York. He'd even listen to my stories about Madison. Not many of the clients are interested in a staffer's outside life.

When I met John, he was stretched out in the basement of the house, wrapped up in a green mummy bag, the hood tucked around his face. The guy who was to be my supervisor was giving me a tour of the house. He said, "That's John Wallace. He's a little under the weather today." The super raised his voice even though we were standing right next to the guy. "John, this is Rich. He'll be working here at the house."

I'm a HAC, short for home adaptation counselor. I go over to the house, watch game shows and old movies with the clients, help them heat up the TV dinners, interrupt the shouting matches, give them their medications, and leave at eleven.

Maybe I wouldn't have become so friendly with John, but I was new in town. I didn't know anyone and I missed shooting the breeze with the guys from my frat.

The thing about John was that he would talk computers and astronomy, but he'd shrug when you asked him how he felt. When he got bad, he'd just drift away, get real quiet. At meetings the social workers hesitated. "John seems to be having a tough time," I'd say, and their brows would furrow.

"Oh John," they'd say. "Well..." We'd all agree to watch him, to keep an eye on his list of goals: get out of bed, take a shower, get to work every day. And we'd watch as he got overwhelmed by the simplest chores. Just as we'd think about sticking him back in the hospital, he'd snap back, and catch the bus to his part-time job. He didn't have cycles or seasons like most people. John was unpredictable. He could be out of circulation an hour or a month.

When a down-swing started, he'd stop visiting friends and abandon his projects, fixing Laura's radio or helping Pete rig up an automatic light switch for the porch. Then he'd stay in his bedroom, and I could hear the laughter and the pacing. Sometimes after a couple of days he'd move to the basement and the green mummy bag.

"Do you want to go to the mall?" I'd call down the stairs. "Hey John, we should see a movie or something."

One afternoon John shook off his voices and wandered into the living room. He said, "Rich, why are you down on me? You put up with everyone else when they're sick."

"Hey, I'm just trying to get you out of the house."

"Still," he said, "I think you're more impatient with me." He smiled. "Okay. Add paranoia to my list."

Maybe he was right; maybe I was more impatient with him. I suppose it's because I liked him. When he was well I thought the only real differences between us were my props: my keys, clip board, and beeper. So it was as if he should know better, as if giving into the voices was a weakness.

I started at the Program a couple of years ago, right after college. They're always desperate for HACs, and they hired me with my degree in botany. They told me experience wasn't important. The supervisor said that they were looking for "compassionate types."

I'm compassionate to a point, I guess. At first I used to worry about the endless confrontations with clients; I'd lie in bed and wonder if I had said the right thing. I finally got tired of bringing the job home. These days if I'm off-duty I'll duck into a doorway when I see a group of clients clustered on the sidewalk. I don't get tangled up in the clients lives like some of the other HAC's do.

The best example of tangled has to be Sara. Sara the softie, Sara the social worker. She was pretty with a sweet face and a sweet smile. She wore high collared shirts and little bows at her neck. Her hair was long and black, and she always wore it bundled up on the back of her head. I only saw it down twice, once when she was combing it out in the staff room and once on the last morning she was with the Program.

Sara worked overtime and never bitched about it even though HAC's aren't paid for overtime. When I met her I classified her as a kindergarten teacher, the kind of girl I never took seriously. Certainly not the kind I ever expected to find attractive.

Doreen, another local who worked for the Program, told me about how she and Sara went through a wild stage together in high school. "Of course for you big-time university types, it was probably pretty tame stuff--you know--staying out late, skipping school." I tried to imagine a young Sara drinking beer or smoking a joint; Doreen whacked me with her clipboard as I laughed.

When HAC's told stories in the staff room about clients, Sara would say something like, "I don't think it's fair to laugh at other people's misfortunes." The thing is, she could say crap like that and not sound pompous.

When Henry stood on the roof one day and shouted at people walking by, Sara was the one who climbed out and convinced him to come down for a talk and a cup of coffee. Whenever other HAC's had a crisis, we'd call Sara for help, not the burned-out supervisor.

Since her Program house was near mine, I got into the habit of stopping by. Sometimes she and a couple of her clients would come along when my house went out to Bingo or to the mall. The

two of us would hang out by the fountain with the moms and their strollers, while our clients roamed up and down Woolworth's aisles.

I did most of the talking as we waited. Sara didn't say much about herself. Once she pointed to a seedy guy--almost a biker type--and said he looked a little like a boy she'd gone out with. A couple of times she talked about her sister's big wedding.

Mostly we talked about work; I asked for advice and she helped me out. I called Sara the afternoon Jeanne drank a quarter of a bottle of Pepto-Bismal. Sara hauled out her medical dictionary and we decided that as long as Jeanne's ears weren't ringing, she'd be fine. As we talked, I watched John drag bags filled with books out to the curb. "Hey, when you worked for me last week, did you notice anything going on with John?" I interrupted.

She was quiet. "Not really. Why?"

"Oh, no big deal," I said. I told her about the sudden search for the vacuum cleaner, the need--right away--to go buy Hefty bags. "I mean, I don't think he's thrown away a copy of a Star Gazer Magazine in his life and all of the sudden he's emptying his book shelves."

She laughed. "It has got to be an improvement," she said. "When he showed me his room I wondered how he could get through the stacks."

Everyone was in a great mood that evening. Jeanne felt better, she even wanted to bake a cake; Ellen stopped watching TV long enough to come to dinner.

After dinner John roamed around the house. "Let's go out," he said. "Rich, can you take us to the Dairy Queen? Or just to the park--anywhere is fine."

I got up and shoved the beeper into a pocket and gave Sara a call to see if she wanted to come along.

"I don't think so," Sara said hesitantly. "I don't think it's a good idea, but thank you."

Four of us drove out to the park and lay on the side of a hill. John tried to show Pete the difference between a planet and a star. Ellen wandered off to walk around and around the swing set; I dozed and listened to the murmur of their voices. It was one of those evenings that doesn't seem like much at the time, but you end up remembering.

A couple of days later, John wouldn't come out of his room. "I can't, Rich. Sorry." He had locked the door. "I think I need to get some rest."

I let him sleep. The next day he missed his job placement at Miller's Plant Farm. I banged on the door, and asked, "Hey what's going on?" When he didn't answer I let myself in. His room which had been papered with meeting announcements and posters of the Voyagers was now blank white.

"Christ this place looks so empty, John. You moving out or something?"

"Actually, I was thinking about it," he said. "I got scared." He sat up. "That always happens. I get scared."

He didn't have a fever but he was pale and had circles under his eyes; it made him look even more like a poet type. I brought him soup. Laura and a couple of the others followed me up. They stood in the door way and waved to John. He waved back and they drifted in. Laura insisted on getting the rest of the group and we sat on the floor and had dinner on paper plates. John got out of bed to offer Laura and Jeanne a seat.

The mood never stays up or down in the house; a couple of nights later Laura was after everyone. I guess she used up my patience. John hung around while I cleaned up after dinner. He carried the last of the plates in from the dining room and leaned against the counter. He picked up a fork and tapped it on the drain board. I waited for him to talk.

"Hey, what's bugging you John?"

He muttered something about feeling a little odd.

"Well, so, you want to talk about it?"

"No, thanks."

"Well, you have to talk to someone." I noticed Jeanne had left chewing gum under her plate again and wondered how many different ways you could tell someone to use a wrapper. I asked John, "You're talking to Dr. Rollings, huh?" The garbage disposal drowned out his answer. "I didn't catch that."

"I said I talked to Sara the other night. I called her."

"Where was I?"

"You'd gone home."

"You mean you called her at home after HAC hours?" I put the plates back into the sink. "How'd you get her number?"

"From the phone book."

This wasn't like John; usually he was careful about the rules. He even understood them. I sighed. "How come you didn't call the night service?"

He shrugged and said too loudly, "I won't do it again." He tapped the counter a couple more times and wandered out of the kitchen. I scrubbed the sink and listened to a fight in the living

room between Pete and Laura. Pete had on MTV and Laura said something about trash music and was trying to switch the channel. Finally Laura stomped up to her room.

I sat down, kicked shut the folding door to the kitchen and called Sara. I was going to ask for advice about Laura, and I had a question about the new time sheets, but right away I said, "Why didn't you tell me John had your phone number?"

"Like you would say, Rich, it's no big deal."

"Sorry," I said. "Anyway, listen, did he say anything about what's going on? He's seemed kind of whacked out lately. But maybe I'm off."

"No, you might be right." Sara's voice was low again. "He told me that... he liked me."

I laughed. "Hey, so you think I should file a report?"

She said that she was trying to decide if she should say something to the supervisor. "But I don't know."

"The super? No, seriously? Maybe we should report it then, huh." I stood up slowly. "But how come you didn't say anything to me?"

"John wasn't having any delusions or becoming depressed about it." She spoke as if she were filing a report. "He appeared to handle it fine."

"Well, I don't know though. He's been sort of odd now for days."

She was quiet, then said, "I did talk to some friends."

"Hey, you should have told me," I said. "And anyway, it is relevant to my client--Jesus, I sound like you." She didn't say anything; I wondered if she'd hung up. "Sara?"

She said, "Actually I think it is none of your business." She changed the subject, asked me what I was bringing to the HAC picnic. She laughed when I said Swanson potpies. But when I hung up I was uneasy.

I couldn't help it: I began to look for target symptoms, and when you do that you always find a few. John was doing great. He was gaining weight; he took a shower every day. He talked about taking classes at the local college and the social workers talked about getting him a full-time job outside the Program.

I watched Sara as she stopped in the Center's halls to talk to clients. I watched her do cross-word puzzles in the staff room, her mouth partially open, tapping the pencil eraser on her lower lip. Once I dragged my chair next to her and looked over her shoulder. "You cheat on those too?" I asked. She glanced up at me.

I said, "I mean, I don't mind inventing a new language either."

After that she would call out clues. "Rich. What's a four letter word for Nile bird?" I'd lean over her shoulder and stare at the black and white blocks; actually I've never done a crossword puzzle in my life.

We were heading into fall; a transition season, the social workers call it, which translates to tough time for clients. Some HACS were pretty strung out, but not Sara. I saw how she sat with a straight back in the staff meetings. She took notes with neat curling handwriting and she asked sensible questions. No nervous gestures, she didn't twist her pens or chew her nails--Christ she didn't even smoke like 90 percent of us HACs do. Dave saw me watching Sara and said, "So Richard, are you falling for Mary Poppins?"

One Saturday morning my phone rang at 6:30.

A slow, familiar voice said, "Rich? The Saturday staff isn't here yet."

I groaned. "Laura, what's up? How'd you get my number?"

She didn't answer. I said, "Mrs. Helt doesn't get there til eight, you know that. Calm down."

She whispered, "I can't. Sara will get in trouble."

"Sara?" I was completely awake now. "Why?"

"I can't tell you." She was someone with a fabulous secret. "You should come over, Rich."

On the drive to the house I tried to imagine what I'd find, but it was a shock anyway. Sara, half awake, was drinking coffee at the kitchen counter. Her shirt wasn't tucked in and her hair was loose down her back.

"Good morning, Rich." She patted the stool next to her; I ignored the offer. John stood at the stove, his face drawn. I could hear the fork he held rattle against the pan. I smiled at him and he turned away.

"So, are you busy?" I asked Sara. "Can we talk?"

"It's my fault--" interrupted John.

"It's okay, Johnny," Sara said gently, "there's no problem here; this is a no-fault situation. We'll be okay." I could have decked her. A no-fault situation.

John nodded and turned back to the stove.

I stared at Sara. "So are you busy, Sara? I mean can we go out somewhere?"

"Fine," she said. John scraped whatever was in the pan into the garbage disposal, and sat down next to Sara. He looked calm, but I could feel the floor shake as he bounced his foot. Above us, clients banged bathroom doors and thumped around their rooms. John and I glanced up the stairs; Sara drank her coffee. No one spoke.

At last she stood in front of the hall mirror piling and pinning her hair. I leaned in the doorway, looking out at the street. It was 7:45, almost time for the weekend woman to show up. Come on, I silently urged Sara, before it's too late. Jesus, I felt like the driver of a get-away car.

John and Sara were at the door saying good-bye while I waited in my car watching. As they hugged, I pictured my car, somehow out of my control, driving up on the sidewalk and knocking them down.

I followed Sara's Escort to the Denny's a few blocks from the house. She sat in the booth and refused to answer my questions; I had a lot of them. At last I said, "Jesus, Sara. I can't let this go."

She smiled and said, "Of course you can't. I understand that."

"But Sara I don't understand. Why didn't you ask for help?"

"Help for what?" she asked, and I gave up. I slumped over my coffee; she leaned against the window and stared out. The glass next to her cheek clouded and cleared with her breath. I wanted to run out of there.

She startled me when she slid out of the booth and stood up. "I'll go in for you if you'd rather, if this embarrasses you." She sounded kind, and I remembered her once using that tone of voice with a client who was afraid to go into the grocery store.

"Whatever," I said. "It's your life."

She said, "Let's go in together, all right? On Monday?" and left me with two dollars to pay for the coffee.

Our supervisor was sympathetic, even offered to pay for counseling. Sara refused. She said that she understood why she would have to leave, and she promised not to visit John in Housing. "I know that was a stupid thing to do," she said as if we were discussing techniques of compromise or some other vaguely interesting subject.

I sat silent and fidgeting; John was not included in the meeting. Someone decided that he would be traumatized if we dragged him into the long seamy process of investigation. In fact the process wasn't long, there wasn't much to investigate, and he was hurt that no one asked him to tell his side of the story.

He volunteered it to me one evening waiting as I helped Pete punch out the plastic wrap on a frozen turkey dinner. John yawned nervously til Pete left the kitchen. "Rich. What happened wasn't that. . . so dreadful."

"John, look. You don't have to talk about it."

But he did want to talk about it. He told me about his guilt--she'd lost her job because of him. He told me about how wonderful she was. He started to tell me about how great it is to sleep with someone next to you, when I cut in. "Hey, John, I don't think this is any of my business. Maybe you should talk to Doctor Rollings." He nodded and after a minute walked out to the TV. "Jeopardy" blasted into the kitchen.

A week or so later, he left the Program. He didn't say good-bye. He put all his stuff in a corner of the basement, with a note pinned to it. I read the note a couple of times: it was cheery and rushed, not like John. It said that he'd get the stuff before the end of the month and that he was looking forward to seeing us Real Soon.

I found out from Doreen that John and Sara were living together, and that John was going through a tough time, missing a lot of work, but Sara was hanging on. Doreen said that Sara was a waitress and seemed pretty happy.

"Imagine," Doreen shook her head. "Talk about taking your work home with you."

I laughed. Doreen said, "No one at church knew about it. Boy oh boy, her parents must be going wild."

A couple of months later I was in the grocery store with Laura and a new client, Bill, when someone touched my arm; it was Sara. She was prettier, much prettier, than I remembered.

"It was right for me to leave the Program," she said after she'd kissed my cheek. "I shouldn't have had that job. People like you should work there."

"People like me?"

"People who can see the lines more clearly."

I picked at the label on a yogurt container, and didn't tell her that lately I wasn't so clear about what I was supposed to be doing, that I was thinking about quitting. Laura came up and stared at Sara. Laura didn't approve of the whole episode, and she still talked about how upsetting it was. She was civil, though, and asked Sara about herself.

"Fine, and John's fine too."

"You're still...?" Laura's eyebrows finished for her.

"We're going to get married," Sara said. "We'll invite everyone we know from the Program." Laura rushed off to tell Bill, who'd been standing paralyzed for twenty minutes in front of the frozen peas, trying to choose between two brands.

"It would mean a lot to John if you came to the wedding," Sara told me. Her voice was back to social worker brightness as she said, "he's an incredible man. I don't think I've ever met anyone who faces illness with such courage."

"Sure," I nodded. "I'll be there."

Of course, I didn't go. I sent them a toaster and a card with my best wishes.

And often I wish them well. I remember that they are both deserving, as my mother would say. In the movies we watch at the house, that's enough for Jimmy Stewart or Gary Cooper. It's at those times I believe that they can be happy, that strength or maybe just good intentions can keep John on this side of the line.

But sometimes, when I hang out with Jenny or Dave in the staff room, we tell the story to the newest HAC, and it's easy to find the moral to the story. We can't decide if Sara or John is crazier. That's what I think about once in a while, as I coax Jeanne out of the house or as I listen to one of Pete's crying jags, and I wonder if Sara thinks of me when John won't speak.

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