

The Road from Crazy
by Kathy Rueve

The view down the steep grade of the Grapevine takes my breath away with the broad plain of the Central Valley stretching ahead in a vast brown emptiness. The highway reaches across the Valley in a straight line, heat shimmering above its surface in the parched September afternoon. Dust devils play in the sagebrush, swirling to a rhythm of their own.

On the road it doesn't matter who you are. You could be anybody, a student headed for college, a woman on the run. Or a girl just turned twenty, looking to make a fresh start someplace where no one whispers about you as if you can't hear.

My Volkswagen Beetle easily putts down the long descent. Patsy Cline's voice soars from the radio, "*Why do I let myself worry, wondering what in the world did I do?*" I join in, "*I'm crazy for trying and I'm crazy for crying....*"

Such sweet sorrow; if only that was all it meant to lose your mind.

Depression is a terrible thing. It had sucked me dry, leaving oblivion where the will to live should have been. I was eighteen when I decided to kill myself. On a moonless night I stood with waves lapping against my ankles, begging them to take me. But after so many years living near water, I didn't know how not to swim. The ocean would not betray me. I had to do that myself.

The little brown bottle was packed with pills. I swallowed handful after handful, then waited for sleep to take me away. Time slowed, my body began to shut down. I panicked. It was late when I reached the hospital but I was still conscious.

Still foggy-headed the next morning, I watched the patients bending over their projects. Slowly, it dawned on me that I'd tumbled into the loony bin.

We shuffled to tables for a mid-morning snack. The orderly passed out bowls of Jell-o, his rubber soles squeaking against the linoleum floor.

"I'm not hungry," I said, my stomach still sore from vomiting up the pills. He put a bowl in front of me.

"Can I have it?" The only other person at my table was a young man with a mane of hair and intelligent eyes.

"You're not one of the zombies," I said as I pushed the bowl toward him, glancing around the room at the other patients spooning red cubes into their mouths.

"Oh, they aren't so bad," he said.

"As long as they get their Jell-o?"

"You'll be eating it too when you see what else they feed us." He licked a dab of whipped cream from his mouth.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"My father's trying to break me of my pot habit."

"He put you in here? What was he thinking?"

"If I can make it straight in here for a month he says I can make it anywhere."

The orderly squeaked past as a stocky man joined us. "Hi, I'm Terry," the pothead said and turned back to me. "What are you in for?"

"I tried to kill myself. Sleeping pills."

"Bummer."

"What about you?" I asked the other man, eyeing the bruises on his forehead.

"I'm Curtis," he murmured. "Rammed my cycle into a cement wall."

"On purpose?" Terry asked.

"Don't remember." Curtis shook his head. "Sometimes I get mad and lose it. Never hurt anybody but myself. Guess that's why I'm in here."

What an unlikely trio we were. On the outside, we wouldn't have given each other a second glance. But here, a long haired freak, a working class biker and a conservative suburban girl came together in the struggle to find our sanity.

An old man in white pajamas, wrapping both arms around his chest, started bumping against the windows. The orderly tried to stop him, only making him bump harder. When a woman in a wheelchair started crying, "I want my babies," Terry left to walk the hallway, a circular corridor giving access to the bedrooms. The staff wheeled the woman out and whisked our bowls away. Across the room the eyes of a man in a straight jacket darted back and forth long after calm returned.

To get in or out of the ward they called M-1, you had to pass through two locked doors. That left only one escape route, down. Terry had heard that once you stabilized, you could be transferred downstairs to M-2. "I don't care," he said, "This floor or that; I'm out of here in three weeks."

"Anywhere has to be better than this," I offered but Terry just kept walking the hall hour after hour, marking time.

Twice a day everyone lined up for pills at the nurse's station. The head nurse was a tall, colorless woman, her severe face and stern eyes peering over us as she handed out capsules in little white paper cups.

"When can I get out of here?" I asked.

"Talk to the doctor when he comes in."

The day dragged on. By late afternoon, I was tired of hearing the doctor would be there soon.

"They'll tell you anything to shut you up," Terry said between laps. By then I believed the staff were trying to make sure the crazies stayed that way. No wonder Terry walked around the floor like a caged lion; I was ready to climb the walls.

Next day there was still no doctor. Joan, the patient crying for her babies, returned to the ward with the stare of the living dead. Shock treatment. The word raced through the unit, hanging over us as an unspoken threat.

After Joan came back, I felt like I was drowning in my own despair. I stopped talking, refused to eat until I saw a doctor. Finally, a doctor appeared and gave me clearance to go to M-2. As I left, Joan sat in her wheel chair in the corridor, rocking and moaning.

People ended up in the psychiatric ward for all kinds of reasons: emotional distress, inability to cope, attempted suicide. Severe breakdowns went to M-1. The regular nut cases enjoyed relative freedom in M-2 with access to telephones, visitors, scheduled doctor appointments. And, if you were very, very good, you could join a gym class off hospital grounds.

At first, I didn't appreciate how much better it was on M-2. I was tired of the routine of meals, pills, boredom, and passing time. My assigned psychiatrist, Dr. Emmett, offered little to make me less resentful of my imprisonment. One morning I refused to take the pills in the paper cup.

"You've got to take them," the nurse bristled.

"They make me feel strange."

"I'll have to report this to Dr. Emmett."

"Go ahead. He can take them if they do so much good."

An outsider, a trim blond woman, watched from the sidelines. She said, loud enough for me to hear, "You'll never get out if you don't take them." I swallowed the pills.

"Good," she said, "I'll tell Dr. Emmett you're ready to come to the gym with us."

That was the beginning of my friendship with Sue. Three times a week, she walked our motley crew from the nuthouse to a gym where we bounced around with basketballs. More than anything else, it was her believing in me that made me start to believe in myself.

Curtis got to M-2 a few days after I did. By then I was on good terms with the other patients; only the staff treated us like we were wacko. We spent our time talking, playing cards and smoking cigarettes. Curtis lived for motorcycle racing, for the thrill of being on a bike. I wasn't sure what I was living for but I was starting to consider the possibilities.

One afternoon, Dr. Emmett said as I stepped into his office, "I spoke with your mother last night."

"Oh?" Until five my mother was usually drunk but functional; after six she was likely to be plastered. His expression said he had talked to her after six.

"I'm not giving her visiting privileges."

"Okay," I said, wondering where he was going with this.

And then he said something that gave me reason to trust him, "I understand what you've been going through."

I had told the truth about my life imploding after I dropped out of college and broke off with my boy friend. But he helped me see it was the lie I had lived all my life, that my alcoholic household was a normal, happy home, which was driving me mad.

Before long, the numbing of the anti-depressants removed any lingering desire I had to end it all. But it was being in the psycho ward that saved me. To get out, I had to want to get on with my life.

Bakersfield is ahead. The only radio stations in this desert sparseness play Mariachi music with trumpets blaring over rapid guitar strums. *Ay, ay, ay, ay*, too much *salsa* for me. I turn the radio off and hum "Crazy" to fill the empty spaces.

Hills separating the edge of the valley from the Pacific Ocean seem endless miles away but I can't remain in this parched wasteland with its oppressive heat any longer. I exit at the next road heading west.

Oil wells in the coastal hills bob up and down like huge metal praying mantis beside the road which winds in serpentine curves. Sweat trickles down my neck; I think the road will never end. Aging house trailers flash in the sun, each one with a rusty old truck parked next to it as if they only come in dilapidated pairs. Their failure to thrive is not unlike my life going bust. I wonder, is this another route toward desolation and despair? Will I fall again when the way gets rough?

I haven't seen the ocean for a long time. The thought of waves caressing the sand fills me with longing. It feels good to want something. Even when I started to recover,

months passed like years before I felt much of anything. Now, I can hardly wait to get to the sea.

I can smell it now, the tang of salt air. The ocean sparkles as it spreads across the horizon. My descent down hill is like a return to a long forgotten home. And then I'm tearing off my shoes and running across the beach, letting the water slip in between my toes and pull the sand from beneath my feet.

A sneaker wave hits me from the side, threatening to knock me over. I laugh at the audacity of its welcome. Tears stream down my face for the beauty of this moment, and for knowing just how precious a thing it is to be alive.