

Winter 3-9-1984

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Recommended Citation

Hardesty, Tammy (1984) "Jigsaw Puzzles," *The Prairie Light Review*: Vol. 3 : No. 2 , Article 20.
Available at: <https://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol3/iss2/20>

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JIGSAW PUZZLES
by Tammy Hardesty

Make no demands upon me
Lest I fail to meet them
These sanitary walls close in on me
Sit in silent contemplation
Of heroes and villains —
And other desperate people
Relax in a chair that has no back
And wake from nightmare to nightmare
Join the other zombies
Rocking back and forth
Chewing and swallowing
And staring into space
Don't ask questions
Don't think — Don't feel
Just stay alive

Tara had a glass fish bowl. Glass! With two fish in it. I stared in disbelief. But then, she wasn't like me, she was anorexic. They took all possessions away from me that had glass in them. I couldn't even have a compact with a tiny mirror in it because they said someone could break the glass and hurt himself with it. (Meaning me, for I was the only suicidal) But what could prevent me from breaking that glass bowl, putting a glass shard to my throat and —? I tried not to think of that.

Actually, I tried not to think, period. I had the feeling that I was really at camp, only at this camp there was only sick people. I was just away from home for a while, not really locked away for trying to kill myself. Locked away.

I was a good sickie, though. I didn't get into fights or yell or scream. They never had to put me in the quiet room, a room that only had a mattress in it. (They put you in there until you felt like being good. If you were really naughty, they took your clothes and gave you a hospital gown to wear before they locked you in. If you were really, really naughty they drugged you and tied you to a bed, so you wouldn't hurt yourself, and then they locked you in) I rose in levels quickly. Each day I was on a new level and before long I could make phone calls or stay up late or go on walks, if I wanted to. But I didn't. I built jigsaw puzzles and taught people to play pinocle so I'd have someone to play with. And when I saw something painful, I turned and walked away, because nothing bothered me. I was OKAY.

Judy, the adolescent director, was upset with me because I never went to rap sessions and only went to art therapy twice. She sent Tara for me who interrupted me in the middle of a jigsaw puzzle. The puzzle was hard because it had a lot of pieces missing. I took in that fact like I took in all the rest. It seems only fitting that a jigsaw puzzle in a nuthouse had pieces missing.

It was noon — medicine time for some patients. Not me though. I took my little pink pill at eight in the morning and at eight at night. Lithium. Some of my best friends were on lithium. It doesn't make you happy and it doesn't make you sad, it just makes you there.

"Tammy, I want you to know that you're not bullshitting anyone."

I allowed myself a small sign. "How do you mean?"

"You're acting like nothing's bothering you when we both know that something's bothering you. You're going to keep it all inside until you can't anymore and then you'll break and do something stupid like what got you here."

There was a commotion where they handed out the medicine. It seemed Claudia, the lady that was rumored to be dying of cancer, had swallowed all her medicine. She said she didn't, that a nurse gave her the bottle because there was only one pill left in it. She was lying. We all stood and stared. She looked at me almost apologetically, as if saying, "I'm sorry I tried to kill myself in front of you." and I felt like saying, "Don't you look at me like that! What makes you think I care whether you live or die?" And I felt like saying, "Everybody go away and leave her alone!" And I felt like kicking something and screaming, but I didn't. I just stared. And then I turned and walked away.

And I walked away when the lady in red attacked a nurse for a cigarette. I pretended I didn't hear her cry as they dragged her away to put her in the quiet room because she had been really, really naughty. Just like I didn't hear anyone cry or scream or giggle or moan when they ate or talked to people who weren't there. I just worked on my jigsaw puzzle.

I had a jigsaw puzzle at home, too. And I worked on it when I was home on a twelve hour leave. And I pretended I didn't hear my parents arguing over not arguing over me. It was a picture of the Golden Gate Bridge. It had pieces missing too. But three out of fifteen hundred's not had. You see — it falls apart easily. That's how the pieces get lost.