

## Public Face *Private Hell*

By Jo Ann Ross

The hospital was an old and familiar landmark to the people of this quiet town. Many of their female friends and family members resided in a wing of the hospital when they could no longer care for themselves.

The friendly and dedicated nursing staff surprised the residents with a Halloween party. They brought clothing and jewelry for creating costumes, and painted gay masks in bright colors on the women's faces. The patients were excited and could hardly sit still until they could see the artwork for themselves. The staff wore their street clothes, so that everyone would feel like a part of the group fun.

Lively music brought many of the residents to their feet, and they danced with abandon. Sharon, who loved to dance, was very outgoing and constantly chatted with the others, although she could not always remember their names. Clara had not napped during the day because she was so excited about the party. Besides, she sometimes didn't feel quite like herself upon awaking. Faye, who had transferred from another facility, was known as a "real live wire". She was surprisingly strong and liked to show off a bit for the nursing staff. Although a diabetic, Sarah was always on hand to help the other women, especially with grooming. She was a long-time resident of the hospital. Debra was the quiet one, preferring to watch and listen. This was due to her bouts of epilepsy, but the other women always took her seizures in stride and acted like nothing had happened.

The refreshments were plentiful, and the residents enjoyed them. Sadly, a dispute broke out between two of the women and, before the nurses could intervene, it had spoiled the mood of the evening. The residents, who had begun arguing amongst themselves, became somewhat agitated. Other aides came to assist the ladies back to their bedrooms.

Of course, order was restored quickly, and the evening ended as it had begun. The residents settled back into their comfortable routine, assured by the peace and quiet around them.

*The State Mental Hospital was a jumble of low, scarred buildings that locals fervently avoided and ignored. In this locked ward lived chronic women patients, three nice words for hopeless, cast-off, and forgotten.*

*The bored psych aides gave them a Halloween party, bringing old clothing and jewelry for costumes. An aide painted the faces of the women, who mumbled, twitched, drooled, or moaned, each held captive by unpronounceable drugs. The aides had special permission to wear street clothes instead of white uniforms. In the restless throng, it was difficult to tell the aides from the patients.*

*Some patients moved jerkily to the music. Vacant-eyed Sharon was the wildest dancer. She called everyone "Beatrice" and talked like a baby. Grandmotherly Clara was herself tonight. The aides dared not let her nap before the party because she sometimes woke up as "Mrs. Einstein", who screamed obscenities and hurt people. Faye was short and very muscular. She lived here because the State Penitentiary couldn't control her violent outbursts. She had killed a man at 16 and tore out the prison's isolation cell plumbing with her bare hands at 19. Shambling, and diabetic, Sarah spoke genteelly and did nails for anyone who could sit still enough. She had lived here for 40 years; the early electroshocks had left her vague and confused. Catatonic Debra sometimes had seizures on one side of her body. Anyone sitting on the other side wouldn't see the convulsions.*

*Punch and cookies had been neatly laid out on a table, but red juice and crumbs now covered the floor and the patients. A blood-curdling howl revealed two patients wrestling, spitting curses and blood. Other patients joined in the fight, screaming and kicking. An aide triggered a loud alarm that brought white-coated men, carrying heavy leather restraints.*

*Finally, it was over. The party ended as it began, in the sickeningly sweet smell of urine, the dismal green walls, the faded clothing, and the insanity that lived inside them.*