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Trauma from the Past

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Transcribed and compiled by Kate Rossiter
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Abstract

Carrie Anne Ford lived most of her childhood in the Huronia Regional Centre. Even though she grew up in a place that was very unkind, she is an expert in caring for animals and children. She is also great singer who won a trophy. Carrie Anne can see and name the truth in hard cases, and speaks frankly about weakness and pain at Huronia. Now that her partner has died, Carrie Anne is still proud of her 26-year marriage. For the past four years, Carrie Anne has been a co-researcher working with *Recounting Huronia*: a collective of researchers, artists, and survivors using arts-based and storytelling methods to return to and preserve lived memories of the HRC. The research team often operated in pairs, in monthly workshops that used scrapbooking, poetry, cabaret performance, and other arts-based methods to articulate traumatic memories. Carrie Anne worked closely with Kate Rossiter during this time, and began to articulate her experience of living at Huronia through writing and art. Carrie Anne wrote this history on her own, then worked with Kate Rossiter who compiled and transcribed this work.

Keywords

Oral history, institutionalization, lived experience, trauma

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The abuse all started in June of 1963 when I first went to the Huronia Regional Centre. I was 13 years old. I was taken there by the police—I was taking the blame for something bad that my sister did.

Upon my arrival there, I went right to isolation for my basic check-up to see where I would be put. Isolation was where all residents were assessed, but I ended up caring for other residents. Also I had an EEG and electric shock which hurt. Once I was finished, they moved me to K3. K3 was a “kids’ cottage”: a floor of Huronia where girls lived. Contrary to their name, these units were not cozy cottages. They were locked institutional wards. K3 had green floors with concrete walls.

In K3, I attended school. Mrs G. (*name withheld*), the RN called me names like “bug eyes.” She gave me nauseous needles containing Paraldehyde,¹ drug to keep me quiet. They gave me Largactil,² another narcotic to silence me, four times a day.

They made me scrub the floors and long hallways on my knees with a toothbrush as a punishment even though I didn’t do anything wrong. Mrs. G. would come check up on how I was doing. She would make me start all over again.

I was 18 with a bucket scrubbing the floors. I noticed I was wet in my vaginal area. I got scared and thought I was cut because I saw all the blood. I told Mrs G. She then threw me into a

¹ Paraldehyde is a very strong hypnotic given to residents to keep them sedated. Residents called paraldehyde injections “the dope needle” and understood its application as a form of punishment.

² Largactil is another antipsychotic medication that causes extreme sedation, among other adverse effects.

room (the “kotex room”) and yelled at me saying “now you’re a woman, you can have sex now.” She threw pads at me. Then I was sent back to scrubbing floors with a bucket and toothbrush. I had to buff the floors with a heavy buffer³ after was I done washing them.

I was punished for looking at Mrs. G. and was put in to a ticking dress—an old fashioned dress that went all the way to the ground and was made out of sacking material. The dress smelled bad and was very itchy. Then I was made to stand in the hall from 7PM until morning. Then I was thrown into a freezing cold shower without any clothes. Mrs. G. told me to go into the play room, and she put a pillow case over my head and made me stand in the middle of the play room because I “told someone to ‘shut up’” even though I hadn’t. Mrs. G. said, “Bug Eyes stand in the middle of the playroom floor.” She then smacked me with a ping-pong paddle on the side of my head. It hurt badly. Then she took off the pillowcase and I noticed she was in her slip. She asked me to massage her back. I said “No!” Then she punished me by putting me in a cold tub filled with ice cubes. Then I had to get back into the ticking dress.

Another time I was sent to my room for stealing someone’s phone book. Mrs. G. blamed me for it. Her “pets” (her staff and also other residents she favoured) took me to my room and jumped me. They gave me black eyes. Mrs. G. scarred me on my chest with a butter knife because I told her “I did not take the book.” I was pinned down.

Another incident: at breakfast time I was lined up with other girls. Mrs. G. and her friends were behind me and she told them to push me and I fell down the stairs. As a result I broke my right leg. At the bottom of the stairs two of her other friends finished breaking my leg. I went to the infirmary for an x-ray. They found my leg was broken. A cast was put on. I was not allowed outside. I was on the K3 floor hallway in a wheelchair. Bats were flying everywhere

³ A buffer is a broom handle with a heavy board on the end meant for polishing the floor.

over my head. I screamed for Mrs. G. She didn't hear me so I went and wheeled to the door and opened it where she was and she then came. She said, "Stop screaming, bats won't hurt you, it's daylight." She closed the door real loud. I cried out. I was told to clean up the poop of the younger children who lived there as a punishment for being in a wheelchair after my leg was broken. That was made my duty. It was wiped on the wall and I had to clean it all up.

At one point while I was in my wheelchair I was made to eat out in the hallway by the pig bucket. This was a bucket that held food scraps for the pigs that were kept on the HRC farm.

Usually my job was to do the laundry. I folded sheets and towels and put them through the press. I did the laundry and I saw one male laundry staff put one of the patients in the dryer. He turned it on and the patient died in there! We were told by the male laundry staff to keep quiet or we would be next. I was really upset. I saw the same male laundry staff take the patient out of the dryer and he was all mashed up. His face was black burnt. The police did come and we were questioned by officers, but we were too scared. It was better that way. The hearse came and took the body away. The staff man told the officers that the patient had climbed into the dryer on his own. We left and returned back to our cottage. I don't know what later occurred out of it.

The pipe room/punishment room was where we were sent to be punished for doing nothing wrong. It was a room full of pipes and rocks—dark and dingy. The door would be shut and we would have to stay in there for 30 minutes. It was damp. They locked it with an older key—it was out of date. They said it's the kind of key they used in jails.

My visits with my family were in a small room—only two or three people could come in at a time. I was always drugged heavily. My eyes were puffy. My lips were puffy also. My dad left in tears, and so did my grandma and grandpa and my aunt. It was too much for them to handle. I couldn't understand why my family didn't do anything about that. They left and went

home. I didn't see my family anymore. After they left I went right into Mrs. G.'s office. She asked why I told my family what happened to me. She hit me and said go to the playroom, and I did.

Everyday a bunch of us went outside on the hill in front of the building. I was burning like hot fire—it was the drugs I was taking.⁴ The drug didn't just cause me to burn, it caused other people to burn too.

I felt like a girl wanting to run away but no one at Huronia could run. I didn't know what to do. I was put on and off the fat table even though I wasn't fat. I was 110 pounds and they told me I was too fat. One of the nice nurses said, "Carrie you're not fat, it's what Mrs. G. said, what she says goes."

I was in my room one night. I had pains in my stomach so they put my bed into the hall. I asked why I had this pain. The nurse told me I had "a doozy of an attack." I'm guessing it was period cramps but no one stated that then. I felt like I was being punished for having this pain.

On numerous occasions Mrs. G. and her friends would punch me in the stomach, pull my hair, and break my glasses. While there, I would be in the shower. I was flat chested. The "nurses" would pull my nipples saying they need to get bigger.

I was transferred to Cottage M. Mrs. T. (*name withheld*)—a staff member—took me into a side room and wanted me to sexually touch her. She was in her slip. She wanted me to touch her body and breasts. I had to or she would lock the door. Mrs. G. also sent me down to B.'s (*name withheld*) office. He wanted me to perform oral sex on him. If I didn't I would be locked in a small dark room with a bed on the floor. So I had to do it. Then they made my friend D

⁴ CarrieAnne was given large doses of Largactil. Largactil causes skin to burn more easily. Thus many residents (often on high doses of Largactil) sustained very bad sunburns when made to sit outside.

(*name withheld*) do the same things and we both left crying. We were then sent back to Cottage M and told to keep our mouths shut.

While I was at HRC, they cut my hair like a boy to shame me. Then I was transferred to Gravenhurst.⁵

When I was sent to that place, R. (*name withheld*)—a cleaning staff—would take me to this room by the canteen and rape me. He would tell me he loved me. He raped me over and over again.

I missed my period for two months. I thought I was pregnant. I was taken to the 4th floor where they examined me. They were going to sterilize me. They didn't see the baby. But they didn't sterilize me because Dr. L. (*name withheld*) said "no." As a result, I had my son. I was discharged from there because I was having a child, so I went home to my mom. I had my baby boy.

These last few days I have been laying in my bedroom on my bed, just doing a lot of thinking. A few things have come to my head about Orillia, about the time I was there and about what I remember. What Mrs. G. said always stayed in my head. She said, "Carrie you'll never get out of here." She said that I'm here for life until I die. It really brings back memories. I wonder what would have happened if I had not gotten out, and if I would have been one of the un-marked graves with no name, no number. Mrs. G. tried real hard to make me one of them. Oh god just think. I cry out to God—I would have been in an unmarked grave.

⁵ Gravenhurst was a smaller institution in the same general area as HRC.