

St Margaret's Asylum for the Criminally Insane

Isabella Wittman (2022)

'Have I gone round the bend?' Joan whispers, leaning into Nurse Hatte.

'To some, perhaps. I think everyone is a bit mad—inside. Of course, they don't let it show,' she says.

Hatte guides Joan's wheelchair through the twisting labyrinthine asylum hallways to The Yellow Room. It's quaint, but Joan has familiarised herself with the demons that lie within its cushioned walls; whispering, melancholic voices that turn vile as the uniformed strangers enter.

The door opens, and Joan sinks further into the depths of her wheelchair once she realises it is a Group Therapy session. She wants to scream, to run far from the disapproving gaze of Doctor J Hawkins, but she is confounded by the wheelchair.

Nurse Hatte watches a cold sweat wash over her elderly patient and keeps an eye out for signs of another Episode. The last one was horrifying. There was so much blood, pouring like water from a faucet.

'Hatte?' the psychiatrist asks, tapping his pen on a clipboard. 'Joan needs to join the group session.'

'I'm not sure if she feels—'

'You wouldn't want to slow down her progress, would you?' and Nurse Hatte shakes her head, taking Joan to the other patients.

Joan grinds her teeth, watching as the nurse flees the room. Hawkins' stares at the assembly—convicted psychopaths, sociopaths—those expected to be found at an asylum for the criminally insane.

'Do you feel guilty for what you did, Joan?'

Joan's mind wanders to the shadows of her past, sanguinary life. She recalls her time in the Deathly War, the nightmare consuming her. The visions begin. She watches as her army general appears in the corner of the room, smothered in dirty water from lying in the trench, trying to hide as the enemy infiltrates the defence. Remnants of old gunshots occupy her mind. Blood drips from her hands.

Guilt.

Her army general falls to the floor.

Loss.

Corrosion destroy her soul, infected with toxins from her deep subconscious.

Regret.

The group continues to watch in confusion and, for some, entertainment. The doctor repeats himself, causing Joan's gaze to dart around the room, her breathing increasing.

'Mad and madder,' Hawkins says, as he notes her reaction.

Sometimes, it seemed as if he thought himself a puppeteer, orchestrating a large-scale experiment— his subjects as Goners, individuals with no family, or family who wished to rid themselves of a human burden, with no ambitions nor will. He watches with grandiose as Joan falls unconscious and calls Hatte.

Panic had pulled Joan under the surface. Like the moon, part of her was always hidden among an infinite, gloomy, void. Her entire life, she had been subject to heart-rending dispirits, and like an evanescent stream, tried to move on as if it hadn't poisoned her bloodstream. Joan carried a universe inside her mind, and through every tribulation or fault, pretended as if it did not exist, that it wasn't corrupting her. Even when she had entered the war, she was still at war with herself.

The Episode she had recently met was the embodiment of a wasted memory: the murder of a high-ranking army general, and the blood was on her hands. She remembers the chill on the gun; how her finger had trembled as it inched closer to the trigger. Finally, she had worked up the courage to press it. A split-second decision that had destroyed a human life, one filled with millions of thoughts, memories, and secrets, one that could never return to the light of day.

Death.

The stigmatising reminder of life's vainness and hollowness. She remembered that it was—in the end—justice. The leader had been corrupted and sentenced thousands to their death. He was a blatant misogynist, constantly criticising her as she tried to communicate with the enemy. All she wanted was peace, and in doing so, she had committed an unforgivable and irreversible crime.

Joan feels a tear run down her cheek as she awakes from her unconscious state. The warmth of a hospital blanket subsiding the coldness of her thoughts. Nurse Hatte returns with a warm cup of tea.

'Oh, thank heavens,' she says, placing the cup of tea before her patient, 'I was worried this time. The hallucinations seemed surreal.'

Joan smiles, enduring the pain of moving her arms from their dormant state. Recently, she'd been too numb to do anything. The rapid flowing of her blood and breath slows, but the thoughts don't stop. They never do.

‘The emperor wanted soldiers.’

This statement catches the nurse by surprise, as it had nothing to do with the current context. Eager for details about her strange patient’s past life, she sits down and waits more details.

‘Did he?’ Hatte asks.

‘Yes,’ Joan murmurs. ‘The enemy were invading. I forget who they were exactly. I wanted to sign-up. the emperor had asked for *all those eligible* to join the forces. All eligible means everyone, so I did just that. They refused at first, saying there was no place for me in the force. I persisted, and eventually got a placement.’

Hatte marvels at this speech. Not once had she heard Joan mutter more than a sentence.

Joan continues, though this time slurring her words. ‘And the general, he was awful. But I didn’t mean to kill him. I’m not a psychopath. I promise, I didn’t mean to.’

This time, the tears fall freely, entwined with guilt and loss. Each one resembles a despondent memory, one that Hatte realises rattles Joan’s bones. They’ve caused this sadistic, inescapable psychosis. Even in her old-age, she is haunted by a ghost of her past-self, and now she must die, never knowing if she was a villain or a hero.

Stars; lanterns,

A deep ocean blue,

Books and vastness,

Ocean green hues,

Paper; grass,

Instruments; brass,

Leaves overhead,

Clouds and rain.

Lamps and butterflies,

Bees and trees,

As far as the eye can see,

With chocolate.