

Opening Gates



a novel by

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The director's office in Manhattan was surprisingly small and drab and the air was thick with acrid smoke that burned my throat and made my eyes water. I was barely able to stifle a fit of coughing. The man sitting behind the desk, puffing a fat, smelly cigar, stared at me through hooded eyes. He reminded me of an ancient turtle I'd once encountered on a camping trip. It was hard to imagine that this wrinkled man was in charge of a huge mental hospital.

Don't think about anything except the salary—sixty dollars a week, more than enough to pay tuition and books. Almost twice as much as teaching swimming at a camp.

“Sit down, Miss Weinstein, our business won't take long. I notice that even though you're only 19, you're going into your senior year at college. Very impressive.” He began reading from recommendations in my dossier, “Responsible, reliable, resourceful...” then looked up at me and said, “excellent qualities that will be extremely useful when you are working at the hospital. Tell me, what do you expect to do as a recreational therapist?”

I had assumed Mr. Carson would give me a job description, not ask for one. Tentatively, I said the first thing that came to mind. “Take the patients outside and play games with them?” *How difficult could this be?*

“Exactly. However, I should warn you, the job is harder than it sounds. Patients are unpredictable. And, there is a routine to working at the hospital. You come to the entrance. Unlock the main gate. Leave your troubles and problems behind you. Collect your inmates. Take them outside. Play games. Keep track of how many you take out—that's how many you bring back. Don't get personal. Don't get friendly. Don't offer to help. Just keep them moving and busy so they're tired when you return them to the ward. Above all, don't lose anyone! You're responsible for their safety. At the end of the day you lock the gate. You leave the inmates' troubles and problems inside

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the hospital. You go home and don't give work another thought until you open the gate the next day."

He made it seem like working in some kind of human factory. Where was his concern for these patients as people?

"Concordia Hospital houses six thousand patients and funding only allows us to hire one psychiatrist for every nine hundred patients. But attendants are trained to give excellent care. In fact, we've just begun to use Thorazine with some patients. It's a new drug that calms hysterical inmates and seems to be working quite well."

"Do I have to give patients their medication?"

"Of course not. That's the attendants' job. The new and younger patients receive insulin or electric shock treatments for six weeks. If they respond positively, they're released; if not, they're sent to the general wards for a minimum of three months." He paused. "Any questions?" I couldn't think of any, so he continued. "Your salary will be sixty dollars a week. You begin on May 28th and finish September 14th. Since you've passed the physical, all you have to do is sign the contract. Miss Gibbons will give you the form when you leave. You can sign the loyalty oath in the main office of the administration building in the hospital before you pick up your keys. My secretary is a notary. Any questions?"

"Loyalty oath?" *To work in a hospital? With mentally ill people?*

"It's required for all New York State employees."

"But..."

"Miss Weinstein, if you want to work at the hospital you must sign the oath. I'm surprised you'd even question it. We're lucky to be living in the United States of America, and we need to do everything we can to protect our country from its enemies."

Every moral fiber of my body screamed, "No! I'm not signing." *I have no intention of violently overthrowing the government. Besides, if people wanted to be disloyal, whatever that means, surely they'd sign it with no qualms. What about the land of the free and the home the brave?*

"Well, Miss Weinstein?" He didn't bother to hide his impatience. I needed the job. I wanted the salary. Yet I hesitated. Then, despite knowing I was betraying my principles, I said I'd sign. I left the interview feeling dirty, knowing no amount of water could make me feel clean.