

# READING JACQUES FERRON

## Crazy

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Crazy was created and performed as a collaboration by Nadia Alam, the author, and Linda Clarke. Passages in bold type are quotes from *Wild Roses, a novel followed by a Love Letter*, by Jacques Ferron.<sup>1</sup>

**The insane are witnesses. Their language is hermetic. No one knows what cause they plead nor what the charges are. And no one listens to them. We shut them up together in places where time stands still and nothing happens.... They all talk at once and no one listens, except those who pretend, those whose job it is to be kind and patient, those authorized to listen, who are around less than anyone else. (*Wild Roses*, p. 87)**

It's a locked unit, the psych unit, and you have to swipe your ID to access the ward. You walk down the corridor. Don't be afraid. Come on in.

There is a nursing station on your right where brightly-coloured nurses flock together, scratching over paperwork, clucking over their charges.

You jump, startled. "You fucking sonofabitch what are you looking at who do you think you are let me out I want to watch TV you don't belong here..." There is a woman behind you, staring right at you, her flyaway hair frizzling around a beaked face. A monotonous stream of curses spewing from her twisted mouth.

"It's okay darlin'. She's harmless." A hand on your arm. The hand belongs to one of the brightly-coloured nurses. "Mrs. A, go back to your breakfast now." The nurse smiles at you. "You must be the new medical student. Right this way sweetie."

You follow her, feeling safe in her wake. You pass a man, wheelchair-bound, sipping from an orange juice-box, staring at a blank wall. Another lopes by with a wolfish glare, wearing a Charlie Chaplin moustache, a plaid shirt, a green leotard and bright red pumps. A black-eyed woman is shrinking into a chair, whispering into a phone, "I'm not like them. Please. Take me home. I'm not crazy."

**The patients in the ward are real demons, all talking at once and making no sense at all. They talk just to drown out anyone else who might have something to say, so you have to keep quiet and you begin to think you're going mad yourself. (*Wild Roses*, p. 118)**

The nurse leads you into a sunlit room where a circle of casually-dressed people speak in quiet voices, charts and clipboards passed back and forth. You take a chair in the corner. The quiet murmur of their voices flowing around you. Words like "electric shock therapy," "olanzapine," and "bipolar disorder." Meaningless. You feel an impostor.

Welcome to the madhouse.

**Madame Conrad Forgues, nee Aline Dupire, is a small woman, of slight build, pert and neat, with bright eyes, sharp features, and an expression that is slightly enigmatic, more subtle than it is simple or frank. (*Wild Roses*, p. 91)**

He is a small man, Joe is. Baseball cap twisting in his hands. Jeans. A blue sweatshirt. He smiles sadly. He has chosen the seat nearest the door in this narrow, airless room. The others, the psychiatrist, the nurse, the resident, and the two medical students, sit in a row before him, penning him in.

"I'm sorry." Joe hangs his head. "I don't mean to be a burden. I don't. But I just don't know what to do."

The psychiatrist speaks then, his smooth voice introducing the others.

"I know you want to help me; you want to make me better. But I just don't know if I can trust you."



Whatever it is, it sounds bad. So I nod. "You're right. There's no such thing as ghosts."

And I turn away, turn my back on all of them.

They're still there, don't get me wrong. But now, I refuse to see or hear them.

**The confinement of the insane, the imprisonment of criminals, the shutting up of unnatural or difficult children, in some cases the result of trial, in others simply imposed, all have their origin in the principle of exclusion, whereby order is maintained by banishing all disruptive elements from the cities. (*Wild Roses*, p. 88)**

You're scared. Crazy scared.

The wooden beads are smooth between your fingers, the Bible a solid weight against your legs. But his eyes are boring into the back of your head. The hair on the nape of your neck rises, and a chill creeps down your spine, prickling along your arms. And you're afraid to look, so afraid because he is your brother.

You shut your eyes. Rock back and forth. The prayer, a monotonous murmur against your lips. Focus, you think. You need to cleanse yourself, purify yourself for the end of days is here. You will be needed. You are needed. And wanted.

So. Don't look.

You look. And his eyes are flashing red, flashing hate. You must escape. Run. But he grabs your arm. You scream. Punch. Run.

The slap of your bare feet against the pavement. The slap of your hand against the church door. God's house. You rattle the knob. But it's locked. Locked to you.

And you're turning, the world whirling. People with hollow eyes surrounding you. Hungry eyes. You push past them. And stop.

Your hands, look at your hands. Red. You tear at your shirt to look deeper. Red chest, red. Red all over. You've been marked. The sins of your past have boiled to the surface of your skin. You have failed, the red says, all those hungry eyes say. Failed us all.

You sink to your knees, the tears falling on your red, red hands. And you break.

You shatter, your mind fracturing into a thousand tiny pieces.

God help you. Welcome to the madhouse.

**She was committed for a type of insane discord known as schizophrenia. This term has the advantage of being of no immediate significance and of baffling the patient, thus completing his alienation. (*Wild Roses*, p. 89)**

Schizophrenia, the medical student lists. Impaired reality-testing. Characterized by hallucinations or sensory distortions such as voices. Visions. Delusions: false, fixed beliefs. Disorganized thought. Disorganized behaviour. Treatment: antipsychotics.

Joe has been assigned to her. He is Schizophrenic.

"There is no cure," the psychiatrist tells her. "This is a chronic, disabling condition. The medications help to some degree, but all you can do is alleviate their suffering." He shrugs, helpless. "You do what you can."

**Once more you will find yourself in solitude ... no one will know why. You will speak and no one will listen. Your file is already too thick. You will remain at the bar, giving evidence in the case you have lost. (*Wild Roses*, p. 108)**

Joe is crying. You pass him a Kleenex.

"I can't help it, doctor," he whimpers.

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I'm not a doctor, you think. The distinction is important. To you. You have not yet earned the title.

"I know it's wrong to touch myself that way. I know I'm going to burn in hell. I know I'm a bad man. I've been marked. But I can't help it. I don't mean to, doctor. Please believe me."

Instead, you look down at your notes.

"Doctor, I'm scared. I try to be a good person, but I don't think it's enough. There's so much water under the bridge, so much that I've done wrong. That I'm doing wrong. I don't know that He'll ever forgive me."

You've watched him. You've seen the way Joe helps the wheelchair-bound man into the TV room. The way he shares a cigarette with the Charlie Chaplin look-alike. The nurses love him because he is gentle and kind.

"Oh, I love everybody. I try to love everybody. I don't want to think bad of anybody. But sometimes, I do. I have bad thoughts. And I know that He knows and that they know. I can see it in their eyes. They can hear me think, doctor."

You steer him into deeper waters. You have only an hour or so with him. You are efficient. Persistent. And gentle, you hope. He listens to you now, his mouth a small trusting O. You cast a line of questioning and draw out a thread tangled with his secrets.

**"Let me speak to her." I shouted. "Aurilda, it's me, Aline." But the line went dead. Aurilda had hung up.... I was alone in the street, alone in a strange city, abandoned by my family and... far from you. (Wild Roses, p. 118)**

She sits at a desk, his chart open before her. It has been five weeks since she first met Joe. Five weeks of treatment with little improvement.

In her small neat hand, she writes a progress note in the chart. Calmer but still floridly psychotic. Many delusions with a prominent theme of religion and guilt. Many hallucinations of sin and punishment. Anxiety symptoms improving. Patient understands schizophrenia, but does not believe he has it. Plan: continue – She almost misses it.

The slight flickering out of the corner of her eyes.

Later. At home.

She sits rock-still, staring at the words on the glowing screen.

"I remember," her sister has written in her latest email. "There were nights I would wake up freezing. And I would look over and see the white lady hovering over you, leaning down to drop a kiss on your forehead. And then she'd look at me and smile."

She stops. Swallows.

This can't be true.

There is no such thing. No, no such thing.

**The insane are witnesses. No one knows what cause they plead ... we shut them up together in places where time stands still and nothing happens... They all talk at once and no one listens... (Wild Roses, p. 87)**

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#### REFERENCES

- 1 Ferron, Jacques. *Wild Roses, a novel followed by a Love Letter*. Translated from the French by Betty Bednarski. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976.
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