

## The Judge Shrank My Penis

By Lisa Jacobs

I had a lot of fantasies about my first day as a doctor. Maybe I'd make an amazing diagnosis. Maybe I'd save a life. Even being called "doctor" sounded cool.

None of my fantasies involved seeing a penis. Of the seemingly infinite scenarios I'd been tested on in medical school, zero involved being shown a penis I didn't ask to examine.

It was my first shift as a doctor in the psych ER. Amelia, the overnight resident, looked tired and worried as she said, "Welcome. Only one patient here, just came in. Tyrell is a 23-year-old unemployed male with no past psych history who keeps putting his hands in his pants. Maybe order meds before you see him?"

"No meds for now," a booming voice said over my shoulder. It was the attending psychiatrist, my boss for the day.

"Good morning, Dr. Snuff," Amelia said. She gathered her belongings, mentioned something about him knowing best, and left in a hurry.

No one wanted Snuff supervising her first shift. He was too powerful and tough, a smug middle-aged man with a moustache who always wore suits and basically ran the place.

He was waiting outside the interview room for me looking at his watch. Before we went in, he said, "You're good with psychosis, right?"

Wrong. The only psychotic patient I'd ever treated was a former atheist who had taken a vow of silence awaiting a religious prophecy. Interviewing a mute patient is pretty easy. Not much to say.

I wasn't prepared, but I responded as I knew any medical trainee should—unless there's a damn good reason not to—with an enthusiastic, "Yes, sir!"

"Good," he said, as we entered the painfully well-lit room. "You take the lead. I'll let you know how you do."

Before I sat down, Tyrell had his penis out. In medical lingo, I charted "unremarkable," meaning no visible pathology. In plain English, I'd probably use the same word.

“The judge shrank my penis,” he whispered. He was pouting and there were tears in his eyes. He was telling on her, like a kid who just had his toy snatched by a bully.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I fumbled. “But you gotta keep it in your pants.”

I looked to Dr. Snuff for support. He was leaning back with his hands folded behind his head, smiling. He looked like he was watching a show that was about to get juicy.

Tyrell pulled up his track pants and slowly put his right hand on the desk, then his left.

“Thank you. Now, tell me about your penis,” I said. I was trained to ask open-ended questions and respond directly to patient’s concerns, but as soon as I saw Dr. Snuff’s face, I knew I’d messed up.

“She shrank it as part of my sentencing. I was okay with it in prison, but it should’ve stopped on parole. That was the deal,” he said. I sat stunned for a minute. It was almost poetic. He was so emasculated by having his freedom taken away he had translated it into a delusion about his penis. As he spoke, his hands seemed to gravitate towards his pants like a magnet was pulling them.

“Keep your hands where I can see them!” I shouted. I immediately regretted it. I sounded like police. He looked scared. The locked ER was probably reminiscent of prison and I was making it worse. I asked, “What was your crime?”

“What was *the charge*?” Dr. Snuff chimed in, correcting me. Former prisoners almost always insist they are innocent. A sure way to piss them off is to say they did whatever they think they were falsely imprisoned for, but I didn’t know that yet.

“Possession,” he said. “But they weren’t my drugs. And evading arrest.”

“Whose drugs were they?” I asked.

“My uncle, but that don’t matter. You don’t get it. She shrank my penis. I look like a joke,” he said, his hands reached into his pants.

“No!” Snuff shouted, jumping to his feet and pointing a single, scolding finger. His voice was so loud, deep, and commanding that I lurched back and nearly tipped over my chair.

Now, we were both scared of Snuff and the interview got harder. Tyrell stared at the floor. He looked ashamed. No more eye contact. He was somewhere else entirely.

I tried open-ended questions, like, “how’s your mood been?” I got nowhere. Desperate to extract information so I wouldn’t botch the interview, I switched to yes or no questions, saying “just give me a nod.”

The judge shrank your penis? Nod. This was part of your sentencing at the trial? Nod. Is she doing anything else to hurt you? Shake.

So far, it seemed like an isolated delusion, a false belief that's fixed or unchangeable with logic. While delusions are psychotic by definition, they don't necessarily impair your ability to function. Many people walk around delusional and it's no problem, like beautiful people who think they're ugly or boring people who think they're interesting.

"Speak, Tyrell," I said. "Enough."

"I want to kill that judge. This is bullshit," he said. Then, he was silent. His eyes darted around the room wildly. He looked scared.

A psychotic break is my biggest fear. It's like discovering you're on *The Truman Show* or a million other scenarios that all share the same terrible punch line: You've drifted away from our common reality into your own universe that no one else can understand.

It's like food poisoning for your brain. Your faithful guts can become your worst enemy with one wrong move and make your life such hell that nothing else matters. Thoughts can get spew like diarrhea or become infectious, too. Psychotic thoughts don't follow the rules: They can be inserted, deleted or messed with by anyone. You can feel like a puppet or get assigned a special mission. Speech can become incomprehensible, undigested "word salad" or your mind can get so constipated it can't push out a single solid thought.

"Do you know the name of the judge?" I asked. "Or where to find her?"

"Nah," he said, staring at an empty corner with great interest. What was he seeing? What was he hearing? I noticed he was focused on my identification badge and the security cameras.

"Are we safe here?" he finally asked.

"The cameras only go to our security desk outside," I said. I held my badge out from around my neck for him to examine, which he did, for several minutes until the lanyard broke and it fell into his hands. He looked alarmed until I explained it's a safety feature so patients can't strangle us.

We made intense eye contact before he said, "Okay, you gave me the sign, so I know you're not in on it. You're part of the resistance."

"I am," I said, having no clue what he was talking about. "But I need to know more to shut things down."

"Okay," he said, nodding solemnly. "They were coming for me. My science teacher was first, so I dropped out of school," he said. "And some dudes on the football team, so I quit. But my neighbors were peeping on me and police cars kept rolling by. I think it was FBI."

“How’d you discover this?” I asked.

He continued, “From the cars passing by. I decoded the pattern in their colors. And from YouTube videos people posted for me.”

Ideas of reference! He thought mass media was sending him special messages. It was a textbook version of psychosis and I had gotten it out of him. I felt like I had just earned a gold star and looked to Dr. Snuff for approval. He looked bored.

“Did you tell anyone about any of this before prison?” I asked, suddenly wondering, how he had “no psych history” and wasn’t on medications.

“Couldn’t, wasn’t safe,” he said.

“But you saw a doctor there, right?” I asked.

“Nope,” he said. “Just tried to get through.”

“You’ve never seen a psychiatrist before today?” I fumbled, shocked. “No other doctors looked into this for you?”

“You’re a psychiatrist?” he asked. “Psychiatrists are doctors?”

Tyrell had been psychotic for years. He had developed schizophrenia without anyone offering him treatment early, when it would have helped the most. I felt terrible for him. Had anyone even noticed that he was living in his own personal hell?

Snuff tapped on his wrist; time to wrap things up. I didn’t need to hear more, anyway. He was obviously psychotic. He needed to be in the hospital so he wouldn’t wind up back in prison for assault or indecent exposure.

“Examine the penis,” Snuff commanded the nurse when we left. “Maybe there’s an infection.”

She shot me a look of desperation. We both knew an STD wouldn’t explain Tyrell’s situation, but Snuff’s orders weren’t open for debate. I shrugged and gave her a sympathetic look. We all have to follow orders.

“Examine the mother,” Snuff commanded me.

I found her in the hospital lobby, pacing. She didn’t look much older than me. There was nowhere private to go, so we stood against a wall and talked in hushed tones.

“Tell me about what’s been going on with Tyrell,” I said.

“When he turned 17, things got weird,” she said. “My ex moved in, so I thought he moved to the basement and taped the windows so he wouldn’t hear us fighting. But then he wouldn’t go to school. He always loved school. I thought it was drugs.”

“Was it?” I asked.

“No,” she said. She looked hurt. “Why does everyone keep saying that?”

“Maybe because he’s confused,” I said. “What was the crime ... err ... the charge?”

“Drugs,” she said. “But they weren’t his. They were my boyfriend’s but when Tyrell saw police at the door, he just took off, not even knowing the car had a pound of crack in the back. When the sirens went off, he didn’t stop.”

“Did you know then he was psychotic?” I asked. It never occurred to me she might still not know. He was engaging the whole world in his delusion like a perverse show-and-tell.

“Psychotic? No, he’s not crazy,” she said. “You’re not listening.”

Clearly, I had chosen my words poorly. I tried to clarify, “Not ‘crazy,’ but he’s lost touch with reality, right? Thinking the judge shrank his penis and everything?”

“He’s no psycho,” she said, more forcefully. “It’s a rough patch. No one comes out of jail the same. But you wouldn’t know that, now would you? How many people you know in jail?”

Zero, but I didn’t think it mattered. This was textbook psychosis. How could she not see it? I continued, “He wants to kill the judge because he doesn’t know what’s real. That’s what I meant.”

“Maybe we’ve seen realer shit than you’ve seen,” his mom continued.

I tried to convince her my intentions were good, saying, “You brought him here to protect him, right? I want that too.”

“I thought he’d get a blood test or something,” she said. “Believe me, I never asked for no psychiatrist.”

“The nurse will look for infections,” I said. “Before he’s admitted to the hospital.”

“Hospital? No. He’s not going to no mental institution. He just got out of prison. Don’t do this,” she begged.

“We have to admit him to keep him safe,” I said.

I felt like I had moral authority. There were so many bad outcomes possible. He could pull out his penis and get charged with indecent exposure or try to kill that judge. He would go back to

prison and maybe he would get killed for showing the wrong prisoner his penis or kill himself. I ignored his mom's plea as I would the screams of a child not wanting a vaccine. The treatment might hurt, but it could also save your life. You're welcome.

My pager buzzed. I apologized and walked away as she collapsed against the wall crying, shouting at me not to take her son away, with lots of people staring at us. This wasn't how I pictured my first day as a doctor.

Tyrell was now in the doorway of another patient's room. His pants were down and he was begging a crying college student to look. He was frozen, terrified.

"Enough," said the nurse. "We need needles."

"Can't we just take him back to his room?" I asked.

Dr. Snuff said, "Rapid tranq, IM, stat." That's code for "Go start the slow process of logging onto a computer so you can order injectable Benadryl, Ativan, and Haldol, our favorite sedation combination."

I didn't understand. He didn't seem violent. It seemed like more force than was necessary, but my opinion didn't matter. I had to follow orders. Training in medicine is like joining the military in terms of rank and hierarchy. I did what I was told.

Tyrell resisted, needing four security guards to hold him down and tie his wrists and ankles to the corners of the bed. Soon, he was shackled to the bed. Then he was injected. A few minutes later, he was sleeping. It was painful to watch. He didn't understand what he'd done wrong. He was just trying to get help, looking for a sympathetic ear, just like we all do when things get scary.

Tyrell haunted me for months. He was in my dreams. I thought I saw him on the street getting cuffed and on the news, but it wasn't him. Would he spend the rest of his life locked up? Would he ever find freedom? Had I helped him at all? Everyone said to let it go, I had no choice and it wasn't even my decision, but I couldn't.

I went to work thinking I would be saving lives, but maybe I was ruining lives. This was nothing like how I imagined doctoring would be. I wanted to run away and ask for my bartending job back. My customers liked me then. I couldn't go back, though. I was stuck in my own handcrafted prison that I had built with half a million dollars in student loans. I knew I could only pay them back by working as a doctor; I just wasn't sure what that meant anymore.

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