

Room for a view

The pissin smell

Contributor's note: This account, reproduced here with the patient's consent, is my recollection of her own words.

The pissin smell keeps coming over me. I can't get rid of it. It comes into my nose and fills my mouth and then I'm suffocating. Maybe four times a day it happens. I feel like I'm losing my mind. I feel like I'll suffocate with the pissin smell. I need air. Then I remember coming down on him, over and over, and the awful pissin smell. I can't stand remembering this. I feel shamed and dirty, and the smell — why can't I get rid of it? I



tried to protect my young stepbrother. I tried to hide him all the time from Mr. C, always hiding him, so it wouldn't happen to him too. There were many others later who abused me, but I don't remember them as much. It's always Mr. C and the pissin smell that I remember. Then I feel angry, angry with Mr. C, angry that I was forced to live with him and his family. And then I become angry at all white people for what happened to me. Drugs for 25 years. Always drugs. Always thinking I was dirty and shameful. Now that I'm not on drugs, in here, I don't want to live. I want to die, to kill myself, so I don't have to remember this over and over.

That's why I want to go on the methadone. I've been talking with the alcohol and drug counsellor here. Maybe methadone will help me to stay away from the drugs. I went to see a methadone doctor when I got out of here last time. He gave me a script for the juice, with a piece of paper about where to go to get the methadone. I didn't want to tell the doctor that I can't read. I thought I'd ask people in the street how to get there, I'd show them the paper and they'd help me. Nobody would stop to help me. They all looked at me and saw a

Native person, brown and ugly and poor, and nobody would read my paper and show me the way. I got very angry and frustrated. Then I saw a bus and saw HASTINGS and I knew that the bus would be easier than finding the methadone. That bus took me back to the life I've lived for 25 years, back to what I know. And now I'm in here again.

I'd like to start on methadone now. Then maybe when I get out of here I won't go back to the dope.

I want to learn to read. When I was a child our teacher read to us every day from a big, fat book about animals and insects that lived in a peach. I loved that story. I couldn't wait for the next day, to hear her read more about the peach. I loved going to school then. That was the

only time I loved going to school. I think I could learn to read if I listened to stories like that again.

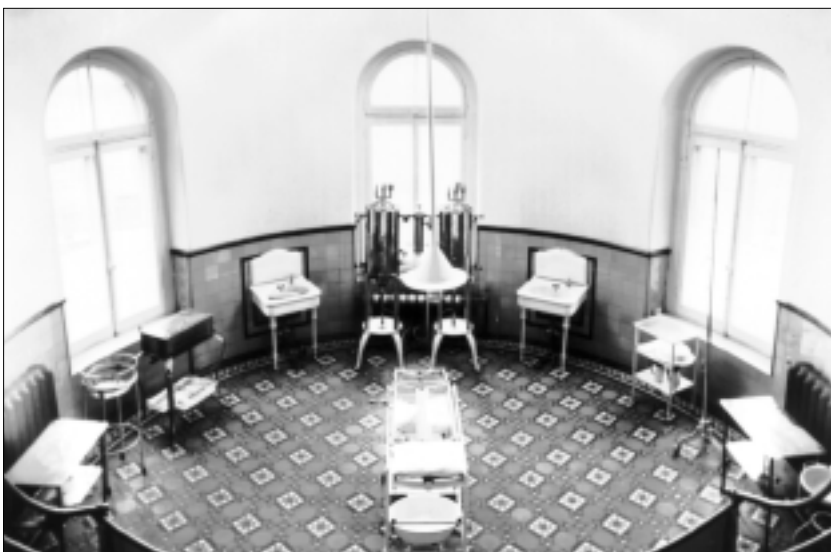
I'm working at my schoolwork in here, but I can't concentrate because that pissin smell keeps coming over me. Then I think I'm losing my mind and I can't figure out the words that I'm learning. The teacher says I should sort out my life first, then it will be easier to learn how to read. I pray a lot and go to the smudges and the sweats. I listen to Native music in my room in the evenings. It helps drown out the memories and the pissin smell.

Shortly after this interview I initiated methadone maintenance treatment for this patient in prison. During her incarceration, through the help of fellow inmates who read to her, and by listening to storybooks on tape, she learned to read and write.

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One thousand words



Jules-Ernest Livernois collection / National Archives of Canada / PA-24113

Operating room, Hôtel Dieu, Quebec City. No date.