

Chapter 8 Case Study

The Case of Jennifer Plowman: Part 1

Transcript of a Commitment Hearing for Jennifer Plowman

COUNTY COURT

COURT TRANSCRIPT

Marion County

Presiding: Hon. Richard Harding

JUDGE: You are requesting that your daughter, Jennifer, be involuntarily committed to University Hospital? Are you represented by legal counsel?

ANNE PLOWMAN: No, Your Honor. I can't afford a lawyer.

JUDGE: I can see that you receive public assistance.

ANNE PLOWMAN: I do not want my daughter to wait for public assistance. Jenny refuses to go to the hospital on her own, and she desperately needs help.

JUDGE: Why do you say this?

ANNE PLOWMAN: Jenny has not left the house for days. She has not washed or changed her clothes. She just sits in her room. Sometimes I hear her talking to herself. Other times I can hear her laughing and swearing. Jenny says that she cannot come out of her room because people can read her thoughts. Your Honor, she desperately needs help.

JUDGE: Has she threatened you or anyone else?

ANNE PLOWMAN: No.

JUDGE: Has she harmed herself?

ANNE PLOWMAN: She won't wash or change her clothes.

JUDGE: But has she tried to hurt herself, cut herself, or something similar?

ANNE PLOWMAN: No. She says that there is nothing wrong with her.

JUDGE: I do not want to deprive Jenny of her liberty unless there is some good reason. Jenny is a 21-year-old adult. If she is not dangerous to herself or anyone else, then she should choose for herself whether she needs treatment.

ANNE PLOWMAN: Please, Your Honor. I'm so worried. Isn't there something you can do to help?

JUDGE: Perhaps we can talk her into going voluntarily into University Hospital. If not, I will commit her, but only for 72 hours so that she may be examined by Mental Health Services. Once I receive their report, I will decide how to proceed.

The Case of Jennifer Plowman: Part 2

Description of Jennifer Plowman at the Time of Her Hospital Admission (From Hospital Records)

UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL

Intake Note CONFIDENTIAL

Admitting Physician: Dr. Sally Kahn

Jennifer Plowman was committed involuntarily by Judge Harding for a 3-day evaluation. She arrived at the hospital by ambulance accompanied by her mother, Anne Plowman, and two male orderlies. Jennifer would not come to the hospital on her own, and the orderlies were required to transport her.

Although she is only 21, Jennifer appeared much older. Her clothing was dirty and covered with food stains, and her hair was greasy and matted. She seems not to have washed for some time. Jennifer had a blank facial expression and showed no obvious emotion.

Jennifer could not name the president of the United States. She did not know the date nor where she was. Although she could not (or would not) answer most questions on the mental status examination, she was not silent. She kept up a background chatter in which she jumped from one topic to another and often laughed unexpectedly. (Jennifer's words have been transcribed and recorded separately.)

Mrs. Plowman reported that her daughter had been acting strangely at home. For the past 6 months or more, she has been reluctant to leave the house. She would go out only if her mother pressured her. For the past month, she has refused to leave the house at all. At the same time, she began to claim that "people" could "read her mind." In recent weeks, Jennifer's behavior had become increasingly strange. She gave up washing and would laugh unexpectedly. Her mother would overhear Jennifer talking when alone in her room. On one occasion, she heard her daughter say, "Stop laughing. I am not funny." Jennifer was alone in her room at the time (her mother was aware that she wasn't talking on her cell phone).

When Jennifer spoke, her speech was quiet, and her sentences were brief. Sometimes, her speech was difficult to follow because Jennifer would jump from one topic to another. Although she had periods of lucidity, these were short-lived.

Mrs. Plowman reported that Jennifer was adopted as a baby. Her natural mother had not played a role in her life. Mrs. Plowman believes that Jennifer's natural mother (who is now deceased) was "mentally ill." Jennifer has always been quiet. She lost her job as a file clerk and has been unemployed for 7 months.

When asked whether her husband was available for an interview, Mrs. Plowman simply replied, "No." Further questioning revealed that Edward Plowman, her husband, had died 10 months earlier.

Jennifer was admitted to the secure ward and arrangements were made for social work and psychological consultations.

The Case of Jennifer Plowman: Part 3

Transcript From an Interview Between Dr. Berg and Jennifer Plowman

DR. BERG: Jenny, your mother says that you refused to leave your house. How come?

JENNIFER: Come, lum, rum is a drink that sailors like.

DR. BERG: But, why did you refuse to go outside?

JENNIFER: I am fine. Why do I need to be here? The walls protected me at home.

DR. BERG: From what?

JENNIFER: Selegonite cannot get out of lead. There is lead in the bed and the walls and halls. Outside, they can get through.

DR. BERG: Who can get through?

JENNIFER: They can hear my thoughts. Without the lead, they leak out, and they can hear them. I can hear them laughing. They find out what I am thinking, and they laugh at their success.

DR. BERG: You believe that lead in the walls of your house keeps people from reading your mind. While you are outside of the house, without the lead to protect you, people will read your thoughts and laugh when they manage to get what they want.

JENNIFER: Yes. Like Superman. I know the secret because I am a rocket scientist. I have flown to space. I can develop new rockets that run on special minerals. I am too smart for this place. I should be at home.

The Case of Jennifer Plowman: Part 4

Abridged Version of Jennifer Plowman's Social Work Consultation Report

Date: December 20, 2000

Social Worker: Li Cheong, MSW

Referral: Dr. Kahn requested this report on Jennifer Plowman, a 21-year-old woman who has been committed by the court for assessment.

Sources: Hospital records, family service records, Mrs. Anne Plowman, Dr. Stuart Berg.

Jennifer Plowman is the adopted child of Anne and Martin Plowman. Jenny was born in Los Angeles, but she moved here with her adoptive parents when she was 7 months old.

Anne Plowman was 28 years old at the time of the adoption; her husband, Martin Plowman, was 29. They had been married for 6 years. Both Martin and Anne were university graduates. Anne worked as an elementary school teacher until the couple adopted Jenny. She left work to raise her daughter. Martin started a retail electrical goods store when he was 30. The business thrived and expanded until he had stores at four locations. As their income improved, the family moved into a large house and traveled extensively on vacations.

Anne described Jenny as a “quiet” and “sensitive” child who preferred watching television to just about all other activities. She had a few close friends and seemed to do well in her schoolwork. Although her parents told Jenny that she was adopted, she never showed much interest in her natural parents until she was 13, when she saw a television show about an adopted child who had sought out her natural parents. Jenny decided to do the same. Anne and Martin were against this, and there was considerable family friction over the issue. In the end, Martin reluctantly agreed to hire a lawyer to find Jenny’s natural parents.

After a 2-month investigation, the lawyer reported that Jenny’s mother was no longer alive. After giving birth at age 16 to Jennifer, she had spent the next 10 years in and out of Los Angeles mental hospitals and clinics. According to hospital records, Jenny’s natural mother was diagnosed schizophrenic, undifferentiated type. (*Note:* This is a *DSM-IV-TR* diagnosis. As mentioned in Chapter 8, subtypes are no longer used in the *DSM-5*.) She took an overdose of medication mixed with alcohol, thereby ending her life at age 26. Because Jenny’s natural mother was unable to identify him, the identity of her natural father was never discovered.

After learning this tragic news, Jenny lost any further interest in her natural family and never mentioned the matter again. She graduated from high school and entered university, where she continued to perform well in her studies. She was still “quiet” but otherwise seemed quite normal to her parents.

A few years ago, Martin borrowed quite heavily to expand his business further. When the economy went into recession, Martin could not meet his loan commitments. He was forced to sell his business and the family house, which he had mortgaged to raise further funds.

Eventually, Martin was forced to declare bankruptcy. He found work as a salesperson with a local company, and Anne returned to teaching. They were getting by financially when Martin (aged 48 at the time) had a heart attack. Martin was never the same. He seemed to lack energy and drive. He became depressed and hardly worked. About a year after his first heart attack, he had a second one, which was fatal.

Martin had dropped his life insurance because he could not meet the yearly premium. Thus, his death put Jenny and Anne under great financial pressure. Jenny found a job as a file clerk but lost her job when she became forgetful and sloppy in her work. Anne's salary became their sole income. It was at this point that Jenny began acting strangely. . . .