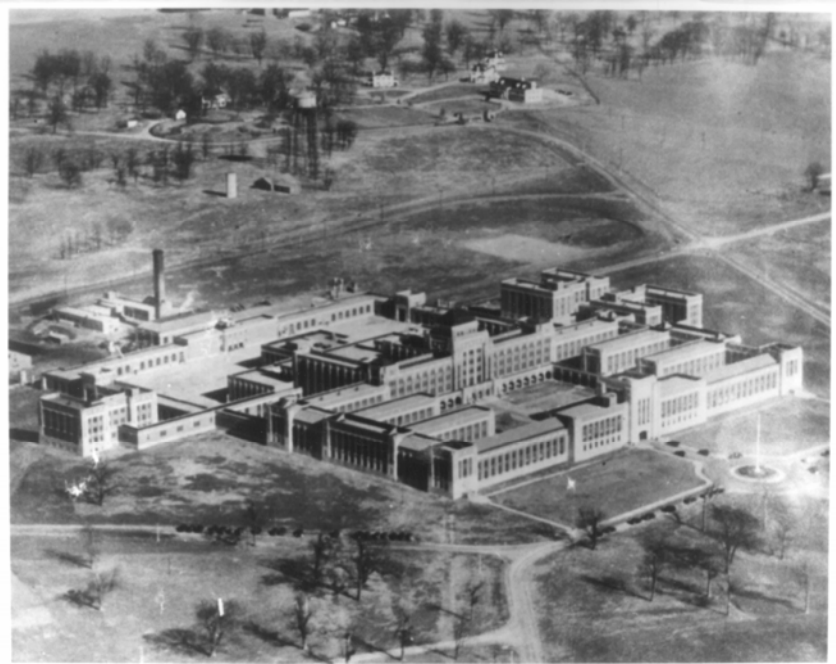


# NARCO BRAT

Marjorie Senechal



Narco -- the United States Public Health Service Hospital near Lexington, Kentucky -- *circa* 1940

**CHORDS**  
**NARCO**  
**PATIENTS**  
**BRAT**  
**DRUGS**  
**JAZZ**

## CHORDS

*Laistrygonians and Cyclops,  
wild Poseidon -- you won't encounter them  
unless you bring them along inside your soul,  
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.*

C.P. Cavafy, *Ithaka*

I avoid jazz concerts: the stomping, whistling, cheering crowds unnerve me. I didn't want to see *'Round Midnight* when it opened in New York in 1985, but my husband did and, reluctantly, I went along.

In the film, Bertrand Tavernier's poignant tribute to 1950's jazz, the saxophonist Dexter Gordon plays Dale Turner, a composite character based on the lives of the jazz artists Bud Powell and Lester Young -- and his own. Turner leaves New York to rekindle his career in Europe, as Powell, Young, and Gordon himself had done, but his hopes are destroyed by alcohol. A worshipful fan tries to save Turner from himself, but ultimately fails. Turner dies soon after his return to New York.

Dexter Gordon was nominated for an Academy Award for his portrait of a gifted, tortured alcoholic. But I recognized Dale Turner as a portrait of the heroin addicts I knew as a child.<sup>1</sup> His dark sad eyes, courtly manner, and slow, faraway voice struck a chord of memory deeper than the tones of his tenor sax, more resonant than the noise of the crowds.

At Narco, I saw him everywhere.

## NARCO

### **The New York Times**

April 14, 1929

#### **TWO FEDERAL PRISON FARMS TO CARE FOR DRUG ADDICTS**

##### **Scientific Methods Of Treatment Will Be Applied Under Government's Public Health Service**

Two Federal prison farms are to be established where scientific methods of cure and treatment of drug addicts will be studied and tested. Their location will be determined by a commission which will include the Attorney General, the Secretary of State and the Secretary of War. One will probably be situated in the northeast part of the country, the other in one of the Southern Central States, which would draw on that region and the West for its patients. It is estimated that there are 250,000 drug victims in the United States.

Treatment of drug patients in the past has been hampered because the afflicted were allowed to leave hospitals whenever they pleased, whether they were cured or not, and those who were committed to State institutions could leave after their short sentences were served. For this reason many cures have not been permanent. The new narcotic farms will only receive prisoners committed by Federal courts, and they will be kept under supervision as rigid as that of a penitentiary.

The first Narcotic Farm opened in 1935 in central Kentucky, a few miles west of Lexington.<sup>2</sup> Except for its high chain link fence, it looked much like the wealthy horse farms and plantations that surrounded it, hills and hollows swathed in bluegrass and clover. As you drove past on Leestown Pike, you couldn't see the stone and brick prison sprawling on the hill.

In Lexington, people wisecracked, "How's crops out there?" The Federal government didn't find this funny. In 1936 the name was changed to "The U. S. Public Health Service Hospital."<sup>3</sup> Too late: locals would always call it "Narco."

Drugs and addiction to them are as old as human history but the nineteenth century -- the "Century of Progress" -- transformed them both profoundly. The invention of the hypodermic syringe in 1853 and the discovery of synthetic dyes in 1856 sparked a revolution in pharmacology. "The addiction problem was inextricably bound up with advancing medical technology", notes historian Caroline Acker.<sup>4</sup> "As pharmacologists extracted pure drugs like morphine from raw plant material, and as they developed semi-synthetic analogs that proved even stronger, such as heroin, an increased social risk of addiction resulted. Improved instrumentation such as the hypodermic syringe also made possible delivery of stronger, more effective doses." At the turn of the twentieth century, one popular "cure" for heroin addiction (and alcoholism and hay fever and sinusitis and lethargy and other ailments) was -- cocaine.<sup>5</sup>

Congress declared a lower-case war on drugs with the passage, in 1914, of the Harrison Act, "An Act to provide for the registration of, with collectors of internal revenue, and to impose a special tax upon all persons who produce, import, manufacture, compound, deal in, dispense, sell, distribute, or give away opium or coca leaves, their salts, derivatives, or preparations, and for other purposes". The law was as far-reaching as its title: within a decade, Harrison Act violators comprised a large percentage of the prisoners in federal custody. The Federal Penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas became a holding pen for addicts.

The 1929 Porter Narcotic Farm bill, Public Law 70-672, was a triumph for progressives of several stripes. Explains Acker: "The Justice Department wanted a better sentencing alternative for those convicted under the Harrison Act . . . Prison reformers wanted to provide rehabilitation as well as confinement to addicted prisoners. . . . Scientists interested in addiction approved the inclusion of research facilities."<sup>6</sup> The Surgeon General of the Public Health Service, charged with administering the farms, did not share their enthusiasm, but accepted the *fait accompli*.



Opening day at Narco, May 25, 1935. VIP's included Dr. Lawrence Kolb, Narco's first Medical Officer in Charge, Dr. Walter Treadway, the Chief of the Division of Mental Hygiene, and keynote speaker Surgeon General Hugh S. Cumming.

Narco cost four million dollars to build, not counting the 1200 acres on which it sat. Most of its 1000 patients -- we called them patients, not inmates<sup>7</sup> -- were heroin addicts. They came from the west coast, northern cities, and the rural south; criminals, jazz musicians, writers, and addicted doctors spiced up the mix. A separate small building for female patients was built in 1941.

Narco's founders believed that a combination of hospital care, psychotherapy, and job training, together with orderly routines and healthy habits, would prove a permanent cure. But as the years went on, a later writer on addiction would note, "the very government treatment meant to help addicts of the thirties give up drugs . . . simply became part of the addict ritual and experience. . . . In time, the farms doused any last, flickering hope that the robust rural retreat would prove the elusive cure for addiction."<sup>8</sup>

In a remote wing of the large prison building my father and other researchers in the Addiction Research Center tried to understand why this and all other cures for addiction were so elusive. They didn't succeed, but they "gained the first systematic scientific knowledge about drug tolerance, physical dependence, reinforcement, and the behavior of addicts of their day."<sup>9</sup> Many of today's leaders in addiction research and psychopharmacology "did time" in the A.R.C.

Narco refracted the confusions, contradictions, ideals, ideologies, prejudices, and sciences of its era -- but not through me. Cached in archives, transcripts, scientific journals, theses, photographs and memoirs, the tale awaits its teller. To these I add my childhood memories, fireflies in the twilight of a Kentucky summer night.

---

We moved to Narco in 1940, about the time of my first birthday. My father, Abraham Wikler, a thirty year old Public Health Service resident in psychiatry, was put in charge of the narcotic-withdrawal ward. Most of his patients were addicted to heroin, morphine, and other opiates.

"In those days . . . the only method of narcotic withdrawal was that of 'rapid reduction,'" he wrote later. "Needless to say, the withdrawal course was frequently 'stormy,' and I gained the distinct impression that the intensities of the 'storms' were directly related to my presence on the ward or to the addicts' awareness that I was available."<sup>10</sup>

Some Narco doctors were driven to ease those storms. Others were driven out of the ward. Dad discovered a deep and complex scientific problem: "Despite the fact that physical dependence on opioids had already been described in animals, the question arose whether the opioid-withdrawal syndrome might be at least in part, 'psychogenic,' especially in man."

But what did "psychogenic" mean? A good definition, Dad insisted, is one that suggests experiments. And so, "the difficulty in defining 'psychogenic' operationally was solved (rightly or wrongly) by equating this term with 'conditionable.'"

Dad's surmise that addiction was a form of conditioning redirected the course of his career from clinical psychiatry to research. After a year's leave for additional training in neurology and pharmacology, we returned to Narco, where, for two decades, he studied the effects of drugs on, and the mechanisms of addiction in, rats, cats, dogs and men.



Left: Dad and Mother with Norma (the baby) and me, in 1943. Public Health Service officers wore Navy uniforms.

Below: the residences (detail)



Narco provided housing for the doctors on its pastoral grounds, about half a mile down the road from the prison. Two duplexes and a larger house, all whitewashed brick, looked onto the circle, a narrow road on the rim of a hollow. An apartment building for bachelor officers, also whitewashed brick, stood off to the side. The Medical Officer in Charge lived in style at the top of a nearby hill, in a white frame mansion with terraced gardens and outbuildings. The narrow red brick house perched halfway up seemed oddly out of place. We lived in a duplex at first, and later in the red brick house. It was cramped -- by the time I was nine I had two sisters and a brother -- but, in its oddity, fitting.



The red brick house. Norma and I shared the upstairs room with the balcony. The trellis made for easy escape.

Photo by Margie Wikler.

The Public Health Service rotated its officers from post to post, like the army. Only the core of the research team – Dad, Dr. Isbell, and Dr. Fraser — remained at Narco. We Wikler kids, the Isbell kids, and the Fraser kids were the core of the Narco brats.



Every summer morning at ten, the fire truck would pull up and the firemen would drain and refill our wading pool. Then they took us for a ride around the circle on the back of the firetruck.

In the hot and humid days of summer, the circle melted to a ring of sticky tar. We sat around, giving in to the heat, drinking lemonade and playing jacks and board games on the porch. The only sounds besides our chatter were the tinny whir of grasshoppers and the sizzle of flies as they hit the electric flycatcher. Their lust for the jam inside led them straight to the fatal wires.



Norma (holding TwinkleToes),  
Rags, and me

Dad brought me a puppy from his lab. Rags was a handsome mutt and we had a great time together until Mother sent him back. I missed Rags terribly, so Dad took me to visit him, deep in that dungeon of a prison. The circular key ring hanging from his belt held twenty, maybe thirty, enormous keys. We walked down long, gray corridors, unlocking and relocking gate after gate. Finally we reached the lab, where Dad spent most of his time, even weekend afternoons.

In a corner two cats, heads down, shuffled around and around in a circular pen, oblivious to the yapping dogs in the cages. "What's the matter with them, Daddy?" Dad replied that he had decorticated them.

I knew, of course, that Dad thought addiction might be a conditioned reflex. Conditioning would explain the high relapse rate: exposed to the stimuli associated with his addiction, the former addict would experience a craving for drugs, just as Pavlov's dogs salivated at the sound of a bell. But what did that have to do with cortexes?

Dad explained, "Inasmuch as Pavlov had stated that conditioning was not possible in the absence of the cerebral cortex, a partial answer to this question might be furnished by determining whether or not opioid-withdrawal phenomena could be demonstrated in previously decorticated animals."

Okay, okay, but where was Rags? Had he been decorticated too? I looked for him among the dozens of barking beasts, but the cages were so crowded . . . Suddenly, I was doused by a spray: Rags! Dad let him out and we danced around the lab. But then it was back to the cage for him, and out of the lab for me, away from Rags's now sorrowful eyes. We walked back through the long gray corridors, through the gates, past patients gazing through invisible bars. I hadn't noticed them on the way in.



## PATIENTS

*You are allowed seven days to rest in population after medication stops. Then you have to choose a job and go to work. Lexington has a complete farm and dairy. There is a cannery to put up the fruits and vegetables raised on the farm. The inmates run a dental laboratory where they make false teeth, a radio repair service, a library. They serve as janitors, they cook and serve food, and they act as assistants to the ward attendants. So there is a wide variety of jobs to select from. I did not figure to stay around long enough to work.*

William S. Burroughs, *Junky*

Some patients were prisoners, others volunteers.

The 1929 law establishing the Narcotic Farms required that all patients stay until, in the doctors' judgment, they were cured. But a U. S. District Court in Kentucky ruled in 1936 that patients who had committed themselves could leave when they chose. After that, some stayed only a few weeks.

In 1946 the Commonwealth of Kentucky passed a law, called "Blue Grass Admission," stipulating that former patients who had left against medical advice could be readmitted only if they first pled guilty to drug use in a local Kentucky court. Their sentence would be suspended if, this time, they completed their treatment at Narco.

Nevertheless, patients continued to leave against medical advice and, year after year, the number of readmissions kept pace with and sometimes even exceeded the number of addicts arriving at Narco for the first time. By the 1950's, the annual number of admissions had climbed to 4500.<sup>11</sup>

Dr. Harris Isbell was the director of the Addiction Research Center. In 1986, I taped a conversation with him in my mother's apartment in Lexington.<sup>12</sup>

M.S. How long did a prisoner usually stay at Narco?

H.I. Well, it depended on what the judge said. Up to five years, of course with time off for good behavior. Three years plus.

M.S. How did they get to be trusties, so they could work in the houses and do things on the farm? What did they have to do?

H.I. That was all penology. They had to be interviewed and gone over and then certain ones, especially Chinese, were sent out to the houses. The Chinese of course were sort of a special group.

M.S. What was different about them?

H.I. Well, first of all, the Chinese regarded taking heroin, or opium, like we regard taking alcohol. They just thought it was a nice way to pass the time. And then the Chinese also were careful. They didn't take too much, or too long.

M.S. They understood how to regulate it . . . Yet they still were caught and sent to Narco. Was that for criminal behavior? Or selling? What got them sent up?

H.I. Even being in possession, you see, was criminal.

A.W. (Ada Wikler) But they were the pets of Narco, weren't they, Harris?

H.I. Well, you could depend on them. You could use them for babysitters or for anything else you wanted to. They didn't like to get into trouble so they stayed out of it. I remember with Beth, we had these two Chinese, and they just took that little girl over. They fed her and did everything for her.

M.S. I remember the Chinese who worked in our house taught us to eat with chopsticks, and they made kites for us, beautiful dragons. And everyone in the prison ate Chinese food on the Chinese New Year, not just the Chinese patients.

In Narco's first years, the vast majority of the patients were white, fewer than a tenth were black, and the rest were Chinese, Hispanic, and other minorities. After the war, as blacks migrated from the south to northern cities, the percentage of black patients climbed to thirty. We always had four "houseboys": a cook, a laundryman, a gardener, and another who did all the cleaning.

Mother saw to it that our cooks and the laundrymen were Chinese. They were very kind, but their soft, heavily accented English was hard to understand. Tong's culinary repertoire was meager but I adored our steady diet of fried rice and Egg Foo Yung. He rarely looked up from his chopping and stirring, but he sometimes slipped me treats. In the dark, musty basement, Lee washed our clothes in a motorized bucket, cranked them through the wringer, and hung them up to dry. I spent hours watching him sprinkle and iron Dad's shirts, though mother told had

him to teach me hands on. Lee pronounced two English words quite clearly: "candy" and "bar. " We struck a deal.

All the men who cleaned and gardened for us were black. I remember their dark sad eyes, and the courteous way that they spoke to me. Their voices seemed to come from far away. Had Johnny been a farmer? His watermelons were sweeter than anyone else's. He taught me the trick: cut a nick in the vine when the melon begins to grow, tie a piece of wool yarn around the nick, and trail the other end in a jar of sugared water. The wool transports the sugar to the melon.(It really works.) Tab stopped his vacuuming, dusting, and polishing to reminisce about Chicago. The city would, he told me, hold a tickertape parade for him on State Street when he returned. After the cheering, after reuniting with his friends, he would probably return to Narco, I knew. Despite Narco's restorative setting, despite the psychotherapy and job training, the relapse rate remained at 90%.

"He's a psychopath," said Mother when I brought up the parade. Dr. Kolb's classification of addicts by personality defect was the reigning paradigm in Narco's early years, and treatment was tailored to type. Like the majority of Narco patients, Tab was consigned to Type II, the "thrill seekers"; in technical jargon, he had a psychopathic diasthesis.<sup>13</sup> The other patients were either normal (accidentally addicted through pain-relieving medications), or neurotic, or criminally psychopathic, or inebriate, or psychotic. I didn't see where the Chinese patients fitted in, but never mind: in time, Dad and the other doctors at the A.R.C. consigned Kolb's scheme to history.

---

The fence along Spurr Pike, Narco's northern boundary, was made of wood and had no gate. Anyone could come in from the back road and anyone could go out, but only the residents ever did. Well, almost only.

No guards patrolled this entrance, but I did: on summer mornings, before it got too hot, I walked from one end of the fence to the other on the planks nailed flat to the top. This took skill: some planks were loose, and if you lost your balance you would tumble into the grass. You might also get splinters in your bare feet. Once - - just once -- two mounted guards galloped by in hot pursuit. Spotting me on the fence, one shouted, "Which way did he go?" Just like in the movies! I almost fell off in my excitement. But I hadn't seen anyone, and the guards raced on.



The back fence.

Photo by Margie Wikler.

Very few patients tried to escape because, said Mother, Narco was a country club. (How did she know? We weren't allowed in Lexington's clubs.) Williams S. Burroughs, Jr. -- a patient, like his Dad -- put it a little differently: "it was a country club, as prisons go." <sup>14</sup> But then why were their eyes so sad?

Maybe they stayed for the music. Narco's jazz band performed on Saturdays, before the movies.

To get to the auditorium, I had to cross the courtyard behind the prison's entrance hall. Patients thronged the yard. Some of them just looked at me with dark sad eyes. Others hooted. They hooted from the yard, from the windows, from their cells. The echoes bounced off the walls in all directions. Terrified, I ran as fast as I could and into the hall on the other side.



detail: the courtyard

The corridor with the locked gate led to Dad's laboratory. I ran down the other one, to the auditorium. The jam sessions were the high point of the prison week, but the crowd was so excited, yelling, whistling, and jumping up and down, that I couldn't hear the music. They say it was first-rate jazz, but all I could hear was the

mesmerizing drumming. The rest was noise. Even the drumming was inaudible after the women patients filed in.

Back in the bright sunlight, after the jazz and the movies, I walked the quarter mile to the barns. Dad had taken me to the stable for my first riding lesson when I was five. A courtly patient working there had hoisted me onto the back of a weary nag, settled me into the saddle, and put the reins in my hand. The reins were just for show: Old Doc, at thirty, had been decorticated by time and could only amble slowly across the paddock. Now that I knew how to saddle and mount, I could ride the guards' horses -- Big Red, Jiggs, and Rex -- alone. I explored every corner of Narco's 1200 acres: the residences, the golf course, the open fields, and the farm where patients tended tomatoes, squash and corn.

## **BRAT**

*When Dr. Nyswander first arrived at Lexington, there were women who had not been allowed outside their own building for four years, except for a movie in the men's section once a week. 'Vicariously,' she recalls, 'I got acute claustrophobia.' . . . Before the various levels of bureaucracy ruled on the plan, she was allowed to take the women patients for walks around the grounds on Sundays. A rigid rule prohibited the sending of 'kites' (messages) to the male addicts. A couple of Dr. Nyswander's charges broke the rule, and the walks came to an end.*

Nat Hentoff, *a doctor among the addicts*

At the end of August we scraped the tar off our feet and tried to get used to shoes again: we had to wear shoes to school. At half past seven on weekday mornings, the prison ambulance, a uniformed guard at the wheel, stopped at our front door. The guards were Kentuckians -- except for a few patients, they were the only Kentuckians at Narco. They spoke with a mountain twang, the twang of lonely ballads and hand-made dulcimers. My sister Norma and I clambered in the back, took our places on a bench, and tried not to fall or be pushed off by other Narco brats as the ambulance grumbled its way to town.

The guard dropped us off at a small ivy-covered building on the campus of the University of Kentucky. With only one class at each grade level and special teachers for music, art, and gym, the Training School was the best in town.

I was miserable. The work was too easy and the kids were nascent snobs. After their rough edges had been filed and polished, the boys would be sent to boarding schools and military academies and the girls would be presented at cotillions. Years of smoke and bourbon would mellow their voices to the unisex purr of a bassoon. These kids noticed who arrived by ambulance. Their parents, and the teachers, noticed who was Jewish.

In the back of the ambulance on the long ride home, we morphed from private school pupil to Narco brat. The transformation proceeded in predictable stages: first teasing, then tossing other kids' leftover snacks around the van, snatching notebooks and ripping out the pages, pulling hair and, finally, stuffing the victim of the day into a storage box under a bench. After a few months on school duty the

guards demanded, and received, protection in the form of a wire mesh screen that separated the driver's bench from the back.

Norma and I arrived home sobbing, our clothes dirty and askew. Mother was elsewhere, at the wives' daily bridge game that started with luncheon and ran till the cocktail hour. The houseboys opened the door for us, helped us wash up, and cheered us with cookies. Then, vowing revenge on our tormenters, we went out to the hollow to gather green walnuts, ammunition for the next round of the endless war of boys against girls.

If Mother *had* been home, she wouldn't have comforted us. "It takes two to tango," she would have said. Mother was a font of pithy maxims. She enunciated each syllable with exaggerated precision to erase all traces of her New York accent. "Better a slap from a mother than a kiss from a stranger," was another of her favorites.

---

"How about some boxing lessons from a pro?" Dad asked one day. "Barney Ross is willing to teach you."

I didn't need lessons. When I punched a neighbor, Dr. Lowry, in the stomach for suggesting I had memorized the passage I was reading aloud to him, my aim was sure and true. But I wanted to meet this celebrity patient. The next Saturday morning, instead of riding horses together, Dad and I went to the prison gym.

Barney Ross looked just like his pictures in the newspapers and magazines: forward crouch, bulging biceps, wavy dark hair slicked back from a square, broken-nose face. He stopped punching the bag suspended from the post, straightened up, greeted me kindly, and slipped a pair of very large boxing gloves over my hands. He did his best to teach me to swing, but I missed every time. This was harder than punching a seated man.

I took only one lesson. I wasn't really interested in boxing. I was interested in Barney Ross because he was Jewish. I had thought we were the only Jews at Narco.

According to Dad, Jews -- unlike their Cossack neighbors in the East European shtetls from which they'd come -- were not predisposed toward alcohol, and I had assumed, logically, that this indisposition extended to drugs. Yet here was a Jewish addict! I learned later that there were other Jewish patients at Narco, tough

guys from Big City streets. The duties of the Rabbi of Adath Israel, the Reform Temple in Lexington, included serving as their chaplain.

My parents never drank, except sweet Manischewitz wine at Passover, a bottle of which they kept on hand all year for Gentile guests. One bottle lasted a long time, as no one ever took a second sip. Yet the parties in other doctors' houses were memorable. Sometimes Mrs. Rasor danced on the table! <sup>15</sup> Or so I heard. I thought that was wonderful and wished I had seen it myself.

Grandpa Wikler had fled his native shtetl, Probuzhna, in Ukraine, to avoid army service and opened a butcher shop on New York's Lower East Side, where Dad was born. Some evenings, Dad played his accordion and told us stories about our vanished cousins in the vanished world.



Probuzhna in 1993. Grandpa had more than one reason to run away.  
Photo by Marjorie Senechal.

Mother's family too had emigrated from Eastern Europe, but there the resemblance stopped short. The Wiklers were villagers, religious, apolitical; the Fischers urban, atheist, radical. Worst of all, Dad's family came from Galicia, Mother's from Lithuania. Old World insults ricocheted off the walls of our Kentucky home. <sup>16</sup>

But Dad and Mother agreed on religion and politics, more or less. They forbade us to share their views with our friends, but the glaring absence of Monopoly among the board games on our porch would have tipped off the politically aware.



Alert for snoops, I did some snooping of my own.

The other phone on our party line was the one in the bachelor officers' building. Their conversations were scintillating.

*He:* What would you like to do tonight, darling?

-- pause --

*She:* HUUUUH?

*He:* Would you like to go to the movies?

-- pause --

*She:* HUUUUH?

*He:* Would you rather go for a drive?

-- long pause --

*Me:* HUUUUH?

*He:* What did you say, darling?

-- pause --

*She:* HUUUUH?

I stubbed my toe on something solid in the sand: a tiny wooden matchbox stuffed with pages of barely legible scrawl. Hopping up and down to keep the other kids' hands off my treasure, I read aloud: "Red hot mama, I dream of your . . ." This called for further study. I took it home and we passed it from house to house. Every few days after that, we casually poked around in the sandbox to retrieve more educational literature, but our source soon dried up. Maybe one of the correspondents had left Narco, or maybe each thought the other had lost interest in their game.

## DRUGS

*The motives for the occasional or habitual use of these drugs are of greater interest than collections of facts concerning them. . . . The physical impulses which bring under their spell such diverse classes of mankind must be extraordinary and far-reaching. Many have expressed opinions about them but few have probed and understood their intrinsic properties, and fewer still perceived the innermost significance and the motives for the use of the substances in which such energies are stored.*

Louis Levin, *Phantastica*, 1927



The guard station. The tree on the right was eminently climbable. I still judge trees by their climbability.

Photo by Margie Wikler.

Sometimes, when I had nothing to do, I visited the guards at their station near the residences. They were glad to have company; they had nothing to do either. In the morning, they counted the houseboys trooping past on the road from the prison, and they counted them again as they returned later in the day. The rest of the time, the guards smoked, swapped jokes, and played cards. They made their own cigarettes, shaking loose tobacco out of a pouch onto small squares of thin paper which they rolled into cylinders and sealed with their tongues.

The guards in the other station, at Narco's front entrance, were busier. Lots of people came through there, or tried to. If you lived, worked, or had legitimate business at Narco, the guards waved you in. Addicts seeking, or being brought for, admission had to wait inside under the guards' watchful eyes until an officer came from the prison to fetch them. And there were others, like the delivery truck with sixteen cases of nutmeg, dozens of jars in a case. The guards exchanged glances: in that quantity, nutmeg is hallucinogenic. The driver explained that a doctor's wife had phoned in the order. The guards exchanged glances again: that particular wife was in the maternity ward of a Lexington hospital. The truck returned to town.

On other days, I rode my bike over to the prison. The commissary in the basement was the only place at Narco to buy chewing gum, Coca Cola, ice cream bars, and magazines. It also sold the film for my Brownie camera. I took many of the pictures in this essay with that Brownie. I intended to write about Narco someday, when the cacophony of sounds and silences had resolved into harmony.



The main entrance of the prison. Photo by Margie Wikler.

One hot August afternoon, as I licked a Dreamsicle in the prison's cavernous entrance hall, the guards and I were startled by the sound of hooves pounding on the pavement outside. A moment later the horse galloped through the open door. The furious guard astride it clutched bunches of weeds, dirt clinging to their roots. I learned some new words as he cursed the diabolical addicts. The marijuana patch

had been artfully concealed: I hadn't come across it either, on my forays into the cornfields.

*So narcotics really were grown at Narco!* There was no telling how long this had been going on; I suspected quite awhile. But why did the prisoners go to so much trouble? They had other sources, not counting nutmeg.

Many times, riding along the front fence on horseback, I spotted little paper packets in the grass. I dismounted and opened them. The contents were always the same: a blackened spoon, rubber tubing, white powder, and a syringe. Thoughtful friends on the outside had tossed them over the barbed wire fence; a patient on this side would be looking for them. I always wrapped the paraphernalia up again and turned it in to the guards at the front gate: I was proud to be a responsible, law-abiding citizen. Norma claimed later that when *she* found packets, she had the sense to *sell* them to the guards, for ten cents each. I don't believe her, but then again, her piggybank was always full.

Prisoners (but not volunteers) could get marijuana, even heroin, at the Addiction Research Center if they participated in experiments there.

M.S. Were you able to shape the research program the way you wanted?

H.I. At the time I came along, all of a sudden there was an outbreak of new drugs. These were being developed by the pharmaceutical companies. The first and most important of these was methadone; that was one that I ran into right away. It was being made by pharmaceutical companies around the world; they were looking for substitutes for morphine so that they could sell it instead, because morphine was highly regulated. They started that, and after methadone there was a flood of these new synthetic pain-relieving drugs. No telling how many there were. The government wanted us to test them out, to see whether they were addictive. So that's what we had to do, whether we wanted to or not.

To test the drugs, researchers needed human subjects. Narco prisoners soon learned through the active prison grapevine that they would be paid in the drug of their choice.<sup>17</sup>

M.S. And what about LSD? Did the government ask you to do research on that?

H.I. Well, actually, it was the CIA that asked me to look into it and all the other hallucinogens, of which of course LSD was the most potent. And remains the most potent. I knew that a lot of our guys liked it, some hated it, and those that liked it would take all they could get. But I didn't see where there'd be any source. But the crazy chemists, you know, suddenly took care of that, they started making it.

After the CIA's involvement in LSD research became public<sup>18</sup>, I asked Dad whether he'd known about it. He didn't reply.<sup>19</sup>

Sometimes the patients obtained drugs serendipitously, as I learned when I asked Dr. Isbell about contemporary outpatient treatment methods. Dr. Marie Nyswander had introduced methadone maintenance in New York after learning, at Narco, to use it to wean addicts from heroin. Dad and Dr. Isbell disapproved: they said it just replaced one addiction with another.

M.S. But isn't it true that methadone maintenance is inexpensive and less destructive than maintaining a heroin habit?

H.I. Of course if you take the criminal type of addict, he takes what he can get, says thank you, and goes out and gets some more. That's what you've got to think of when you deal with people like this.

A.W. Well Marie should have known about that. She was here long enough to know that.

H.I. She did know that. I warned her about it but it didn't do any good. Marie, one Christmas, went around giving Christmas shots. Can you imagine that?

M.S. Methadone shots? Or morphine?

H.I. Morphine. I had to go and stop her.

M.S. Did she say why she did it?

H.I. Well, she said it's much better than alcohol. And it was Christmas time, and the boys needed cheering up. I'll never forget that. She was giving it to everybody until I got into the act and stopped the whole thing. It didn't make a lot of sense to go around giving out shots for Christmas.

With all these other options, why *did* the patients grow pot in the corn? This risky behavior was easily explained by Dad's "hustling theory" of addiction. According to Dad, ". . . 'hustling' (operant behavior directed toward obtaining opioids) is reinforcing in its own right — i.e., brings about reinforcements in addition to the acquisition of drugs." That is, the search for drugs becomes part of the conditioning. It gives structure and purpose to an otherwise meaningless life.<sup>20</sup>

As I said, summers at Narco were long and boring.

## JAZZ

*In my youth, at home in Kentucky, there was a dance place just outside of town [Lexington] called Joyland Park. In the summer the great bands arrived, Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Chick Webb, sometimes for a Friday and Saturday or merely for one night. When I speak of the great bands it must not be taken to mean that we thought of them as such. No, they were part of the summer nights and the hot dog stands, the fetid swimming pool heavy with chlorine, the screaming roller coaster, the old rain-splintered picnic tables, the broken iron swings. And the bands were also part of Southern drunkenness, couples drinking Coke and whisky, vomiting, being unfaithful, lovelorn, frantic. The black musicians, with their cumbersome instruments, their tuxedos, were simply there to beat out time ....*

Elizabeth Hardwick, *Sleepless Nights*

As I grew older, Narco changed too. "Why are they building a platform outside the barn?" "For the auction: they're going to sell the horses." Every night I had fallen asleep to the gentle sound of their clopping hooves as the guards made their evening rounds. Now they would make their rounds by car.

We, the Narco brats, decided to buy Big Red, Jiggs or Rex ourselves. We could scrounge up only twenty five dollars among us, but who would bid against a gaggle of adorable children in tears? No one did. The bidding opened at thirty dollars. My childhood slipped into the past.



Other Narco brats, circa 1952. Clockwise from left: Dickie Chapman, Robbie Rasor, Jim Cooper, Beth Isbell, Amy Rasor, my brother Danny, Ann Isbell, and my sister Norma. (Dan insists that his choice of a career in medical ethics was not inspired by Narco.)

Photo by Margie Wikler.

Not long after the horses were sold, my parents moved us to Lexington. Out of *'Round Midnight* and into *Driving Miss Daisy*: quiet, leafy neighborhoods; formal living rooms, drapes drawn against the afternoon sun; black maids in large kitchens. Norma and I rode a yellow school bus, not to U High but to the county high school, Lafayette. The kids there spoke the twang of the guards. They were not snobs. But I was miscast in my new role as a Lexington teenager. I saw everything through Narco eyes.

Narco houseboys had come and gone; Beatrice, who cleaned and cooked for us and looked after Danny and Jeanne, would never leave the ghetto. Narco's jazz was inaudible, Lexington's invisible. Narco was an early skirmish in America's War on Drugs. Legal drugs and thrills -- whiskey, tobacco and horseracing -- were Lexington's wealth and pride.<sup>21</sup>

For me, Lexington was a looking-glass prison, with walls of hypocrisy and conformity as strong as brick and stone. After two years I escaped to the University of Chicago, which didn't require a high school diploma. I erased all traces of my Kentucky accent, or thought I did, and didn't look back for a long, long time.

---

Deinstitutionalization, congressional investigations, and budget slashing still lay in the future, but Dad was ready for a change -- provided he could stay in Lexington, which he'd grown to love.<sup>22</sup> After the University of Kentucky opened its medical school in 1960, he retired from the Public Health Service and joined the faculty; Dr. Isbell followed a few years later. Dad died in 1981, a victim of his own addiction to tobacco. Dr. Isbell died in 1997; his Laistrygonian was alcohol.

Residential treatment centers are out of style, but the incarceration of addicts continues. Today Narco is an all-purpose federal penitentiary for women, most of them convicted of drug-related crimes. After it was transferred to the Bureau of Prisons, "a close and longtime associate of the program commented that he knew if he stayed around long enough, Lexington [Narco] would end up the way it started, thus expressing the cyclic nature of both institutional evolution and scientific thinking."<sup>23</sup> I read in a newspaper recently that some treatment specialists suspect the robust retreat may not be such a bad idea after all.

The Addiction Research Center is now a branch of NIDA, the National Institute on Drug Abuse in Baltimore. In 1988, my Mother and I attended the first annual Abraham Wikler Memorial Lecture there.

Norma and I returned to Narco a few years ago.



The barns at Narco, 1998.

Photo by Marjorie Senechal.

Dilapidated barns bear witness to the long-closed farm. The back fence has been painted white. The residences are just as we remembered them.

Children are playing on the circle. We wave to them and they wave back.

The warden, a smart and funny woman, gives us a tour of the prison. The auditorium is smaller than it used to be. The tiny stage is crowded with musicians: it's odd that she neither sees nor hears them. Everyone's playing at once, still discordant, oblivious to all the others. Over on the left, klezmer leaps from Dad's accordion, pierced by the clashing of Mother's decisive cymbals. On the right, a Chinese patient plays a gentle, wistful tune on a wooden flute, a guard sings and strums his dulcimer, a kid from Training School tortures a bassoon. In the back a drummer whacks his drum set and a bunch of Narco brats fool around.

The spotlight falls on Dale Turner and his sax, at center stage. The crowd hoots, stomps, whistles, cheers. Rags barks.

I strain to hear the jazz above the din.



## NOTES and REFERENCES

---

<sup>1</sup> In fact, Dexter Gordon served two prison sentences on drug charges in the 1950's, but not at Narco.

<sup>2</sup> The second opened in 1938 in Fort Worth, Texas. Though a little larger than Narco, it had fewer patients, and no research program.

<sup>3</sup> In 1934 The Lexington Leader held a contest to name the farm: the paper received 793 suggestions, from "Acropolis Sequela" to "Zeesbury". (Administrative records, Public Health Service Lexington Narcotic Hospital, National Archives.) Evidently the U.S.P.H.S. did not consult the Leader.

<sup>4</sup> Caroline Jean Acker, *Social problems and scientific opportunities: the case of opiate addiction in the U.S., 1920-1940*, Ph.D. thesis, University of California at San Francisco, 1993, pp. 74-75.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., David Musto, *The American Disease: origins of narcotic control*, third edition, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Acker, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

<sup>7</sup> This terminology reflected Narco's *raison d'être*, the premise that addiction is a curable illness.

<sup>8</sup> Jill Jonnes, *Hep-Cats, Narcs, and Pipe Dreams*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Paperbacks, 1999, p. 113.

<sup>9</sup> Avram Goldstein, from the abstract for his lecture "Addiction Research: An Historical Perspective," presented at NIDA's 25th Anniversary Symposium, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD, September 27, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> This and subsequent quotes from my father, Abraham Wikler, are taken from his article "Neurophysiological and Neuropsychiatric Aspects of Opioid Dependence," in *Drug Addiction and the U. S. Public Health Service*, DHEW Publication No. (ADM), 1978, pp. 63-88.

<sup>11</sup> James F. Maddux, "History of the Hospital Treatment Programs, 1935-74," in *Drug Addiction and the U. S. Public Health Service*, in *Drug Addiction and the U. S. Public Health Service, op. cit.*, p. 225.

<sup>12</sup> Conversation with Dr. Harris Isbell, Lexington, Kentucky, June 28, 1986. A (lightly edited) transcript is available on request.

<sup>13</sup> In one early study (Michael J. Pescor, "The Kolb Classification of Drug Addicts," *Public Health Reports*, Supplement 155, 1939), fifty five percent of a sample population of Narco patients were found to be Type II.

<sup>14</sup> William S. Burroughs, Jr., *Kentucky Ham*, Woodstock, N.Y., Overlook Press, 1984.

<sup>15</sup> *Sic transit gloria mundi*. Early in Dr. Rasor's second tour of duty at Narco, Mrs. Rasor was shot by a former patient who had returned to kill a former Medical Officer in Charge. She was paralyzed from the neck down until her death from pneumonia six years later.

<sup>16</sup> Both claimed to have rejected Old World customs and practices. Yet Mother's slaps and epithets, Dad's near-total immersion in his work, and other features of our family life that set us apart from our Narco

---

neighbors were, I understood later, straight out of East European Jewish culture. See, for example, M. Zborowski and E. Herzog, *Life Is With People*, New York, Schocken Books, 1962. Not that we were straight out of any book.

<sup>17</sup> See "Hearings before the Committee of the Judiciary, House of Representatives, on HR 3503 to limit the use of prison inmates in medical research," Sept. 29 and October 1, 1975, Serial No. 31, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976. It has been suggested (by, e.g., M. Lee and B. Shlain, *Acid Dreams*, New York, Grove Weidenfeld, 1992) that the drug payments contributed to the high rate of readmission.

<sup>18</sup> For an extensive list of references to U.S. Government documents, see John Marks, *The Search for the Manchurian Candidate*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1979, p. 234. Marks notes that "Dr. Isbell refuses all request for interviews."

<sup>19</sup> Dad was a co-author of some of the published LSD research. But, it seems, only Dr. Isbell, the director of the A.R.C., had the security clearance to know that the CIA had funded and directed it.

<sup>20</sup> "Wikler's formulations permit the development and implementation of precise treatment techniques, e.g., extinguishing specific conditioned responses which maintain addictive behavior patterns. Interestingly, however, few practitioners have implemented treatment programs based on the sophisticated theoretical perspectives provided by Wikler. It may be that his formulations were too complex for most practitioners to utilize within the typical treatment setting.." H. Shaffer and M. E. Burglass, eds., *Classic Contributions in the Addictions*, Brunner/Mazel, New York, 1981, p. 338.

<sup>21</sup> Later, according to Sally Denton in *Bluegrass Conspiracy* (New York, Avon Books, 1990), some kids I'd known at the Training School were deeply involved in the international drug trade.

<sup>22</sup> As renowned for not suffering fools as for his research, Dad abhorred the social scene. But he enjoyed the meetings of a discussion club he founded, the Central Kentucky Spinoza Society, and, thanks to the university, Lexington's cultural life was rich.

<sup>23</sup> From the preface, by Dr. William Martin and Dr. Harris Isbell, to *Drug Addiction and the Public Health Service*, *op. cit.*, p. ix.

The boxed quotations are from William S. Burroughs, *Junky* (originally published as *Junkie*, under the pen-name of William Lee), Penguin Books, 1977; Nat Hentoff, *a doctor among the addicts*, Rand McNally & Company, 1968; Lewis Levin, *Phantastica*, reprint of the 1931 English translation, reprinted by the Park Street Press, 1988; and Elizabeth Hardwick, *Sleepless Nights*, Vintage Books, 1980.