



# **THE HIDDEN ORACLE**

**Crystal Moore**

*Psychotherapy: Portraits in Fiction*

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# Introduction

## **“The Hidden Oracle”** by Crystal Moore

“The Hidden Oracle,” written under a pseudonym, is autobiographical. Whether the incidents described by the author are fictional or actually happened, they express an essential truth. Individuals who, like Crystal, dread intimacy yet intensely crave closeness cannot avail themselves of the healing potential of human relationships and have difficulty with the possibilities for relatedness in the psychotherapeutic relationship. Psychotic patients withdraw from and may respond with hostility to caring concern and intimacy. In this story a young woman who invites rejection encounters a paraprofessional who “stays with” her, thereby opening up the possibility of recovery.

# The Hidden Oracle

*Crystal Moore*

No sooner had the mashed potatoes escaped my hand and landed with bull’s-eye precision smack in the middle of Dwight’s forehead, than someone yelled, “Seclusion!” and I was surrounded by attendants on all sides. Then there were just four walls, a mattress on the floor, a barred window, and a door to the hallway, where Dwight sat in his armchair, blocking my way to freedom.

“Why did you do it?” he asked me.

“Because I want some sympathy is why!”

“Honey, you ain’t gonna get no sympathy throwin’ things at people. If you want sympathy, you got to ask for it.”

Welling tears of indignation flooded my vision, drenching the fire of my pain, blurring the glimmering lights that shone in the dark through the bars of the window—lights from offices in the clinical center, from street lamps reflected on the slick, wet highway, from cars passing in the night for destinations unknown—destinations toward which I might never again strive. I pressed my burning cheek against the bars.

“Hey, watcha doin’ in there?”

“Nothing, Dwight, just watching the cars pass by.”

“Oh.”

“Dwight?”

“Hmmm?”

“You think I’ll ever get out of here?”

“I don’t know, honey. That’s up to you.”

“Dwight?”

“Hmmm?”

I turned to him, tears streaming down my face. “I want some sympathy.”

His answer came straight away. “I sympathize, Crys, honey,” he said. “I sympathize.”

Somewhere a patient screamed for her doctor, and the aides tried to calm her, probably strapped her to a chair or tied her up in a cold wet sheet pack.

“You’re torturing me!” echoed her plaintive wail.

Dwight cracked his gum.

“You ready to come out now, Crys honey? I ain’t gonna sit here all night waitin’ for you to apologize.”

My eyes focused on his shiny black face in the doorway, his rhythmic jaw, the silver blue trail of his cigarette smoke a silhouette against linoleum tiles of a fluorescent corridor.

“Apologize for what?” I asked.

“You know for what.”

“Tell me.”

“You threw something at me.”

“Oh.”

A freckled boy careened down the hall, his groping hands plastered to the wall, guiding his way.

“I’m blind,” he said to Dwight and me as he passed the seclusion room. “It’s a sign from God.”

“Dwight?” I asked. “Where am I?”

But when he told me, I couldn’t listen to the words—just shook my head and whispered, “No, no, not that. Not a hospital. Not crazy. Not me.”

“You’re lying!” I shouted at him, and running, charged through the door where Dwight was on his feet now, sounding the alarm.

But in the hall it was no better. Just miles of lime green linoleum tile stretched into the future—visions of an endless maze of institutions—my

faceless existence as a no-name fugitive.

Haunting, ephemeral ghosts rushed by—some long-forgotten dream that recalled a tortured soul. They tapped me on the shoulder like a friend, but as I turned to meet them, slapped me in the face like howling, taunting winter winds. Next instant they were gone again—vague, shadowy impressions of a memory, hidden for so long I'd begun to think I'd lost them—then suddenly returning, burning lava erupting into my consciousness.

“Never get out,” whispered the voices. “Crystal, you'll never get out.”

And the stench filled my nostrils—old cooking, blood, sweat, urine, vomit, Lysol, deodorant soap. Linoleum tiles saturated with infinite unheeded echoes—tears of rage, cries of pain—the stench of human despair.

Dwight found me in the solarium—racked with tears, face hidden in folded arms on the piano keyboard. Dissonant chords ripped from the instrument with my every heavy torrent.

“I know it's hard for you, Crys,” said his scratchy voice.

Why does he have to keep following me? I thought. “Leave me alone,” I growled at him.

“But you got to face up to it, honey. That's your problem. You're not tough enough. You got to be tough in this life. Tough as nails. You go out there on the street, there ain't nobody gonna rescue you.”



“I’ll never get out of here, and you know it.”

“That’s up to you, honey. That’s what I’m sayin’. You got to fight it. Ain’t nobody gonna hand you things on a silver platter. You ain’t Daddy’s little girl no more.”

“Daddy’s the one who put me in here, Dwight! They don’t care about me.”

“Now, don’t you go cuttin’ up on your parents again. Sure, they care about you. I know they got their problems. Everybody does. But worryin’ about their problems ain’t gonna help you solve yours.” Dwight lit a cigarette. “Besides, you know one thing for sure. When you’re in trouble, or you’re real sick, who you gonna turn to for help?” He took a drag and let it out slowly. “I’ll tell you who—your parents. Don’t deny it. You might try runnin’ away, goin’ to some ashram or I don’t know where all, but you know where you wind up in the end? Right back home. They’re there for you, Crys, and you know it. Ain’t nobody gonna tell you different.”

I was silent.

“Where you think you got those clothes you’re wearin’?”

I shrugged.

“I’ll tell you where. Your sister Katie went out and bought ‘em for you, after you came into the hospital. When you’d gone and given all your clothes

away to some ashram or other. You didn't have a stitch of your own besides the shirt on your back when you came in here."

"That's not true. I had a suitcase."

"Yeah, you remember what you had in that suitcase of yours?"

I did. One floor-length hand-stitched kelly green ruffled bathrobe with white trim, a sheer black body stocking, a razor, and a print of Salvador Dali's "The Last Supper." But the nursing staff went through my bag and took away the razor.

"Those things you brought in here weren't gonna do you no good. What if Katie didn't go out and buy you all new things? What then? You gonna sit here and tell me your family don't care what happens to you?"

"Dwight?" My voice broke.

"Yes, honey."

The tears were starting to stream down my cheeks again. "I'm sorry I threw the mashed potatoes," I choked.

Then that big black stranger took me in his arms like I was a lost child, let my sobs drown out onto his strong, soft shoulder. And I thought about how he smelled of fresh cologne, how I was bedraggled, how he didn't care I was dirty, just I was hurting.

“I know, honey, I know you didn’t mean it. Now, you just go ahead and cry if you want to,” said Dwight. “You got a lot to cry about.”

The battle lines were drawn.

In one corner of the ring stood my mother—teeth bared, claws outstretched, primed for the fight. An anticipatory snarl escaped her lips. In the opposite corner was my father—darting, first building up the defensive, then backing flat against the ropes.

He’s the one who belongs in here, I thought. Not me.

Dr. Will rang the bell. “It’s time for family therapy to begin,” he said.

Icicle bars of frozen tension, having held us at safe if tenuous distance until that moment, instantly crashed to the floor like so much shattered glass. And Mummy was on me, the unleashed cat clawing my raw flesh. Daddy followed close behind, binding my limbs with his ties, locking me into position to receive the blows.

“Hold it!” cried Dwight. “Time out. Foul play.”

Dr. Will rang the bell again. Round two.

This time my mother went straight for Daddy. “His violence,” she said, “is impossible to live with. You never know from one minute to the next when his temper will flare up. And then the whole house shakes with his rage. He starts slamming doors, threatening to leave, walking out.”

I was egging her on—While she attacked him, I could hope for at least momentary safety. But Katie ran to my father's aid, protected him from us, mopped the blood from his brow. Dwight and Dr. Will were staying on the sidelines.

"He's never provided adequately for the girls and me," Mummy continued. "I earn over half the income, but as soon as I bring any money home, he spends it—pretends it's his money, not mine. He steals it from me."

"That's enough!" my father roared. "I fail to see that this is getting us anywhere. It's Crystal's problem we're here to discuss, not my wife's and my petty household arguments." He turned to me with effort, saying, "I know I've failed Crys as a father. I haven't given her the kind of love she needed."

The faces of my family had frozen—still, silent, shocked, unyielding.

Then slowly, began to melt again, this time with Daddy looking at me differently. And I saw, for the first time, that the brick wall I had always thought was my father was in fact a person—a man with a history I had never known existed, with feelings, with long hidden, fiercely guarded secrets he had never before deigned to share. I saw, I finally saw, that I had made my father a grief-stricken man—and that he had forgiven me.

Washington was a southern town, never more so than on lazy summer afternoons when fashionable ladies sat in wrought iron chairs on shaded lawns, holding glasses of iced tea steeped in mint, conversations laced with

viciousness and charm, and a mandatory veneer of elegance over faces flushed with heat and exasperation. By then the wisteria were in their second blooming, having weaved a jungle through my parents' fence, and passersby stopped their cars to photograph that shock of lavender blossoms, careful to dodge the bees that swarmed in air so thick with the flowers' grape perfume you could cut it with a knife.

Tucked away on the edge of Washington—anachronistic reminder of rustic timelessness, sheltered by lush maples from any trace of modern civilization, sat my parents' house. I was home, gratefully clasping the daintily lace gloved hands of Mummy's tea party friends, pecking the air beside the deftly rouged cheeks, pretending that nothing had happened.

Never, I swore to myself, heady from the air of freedom and jubilantly donning my facade, never will I give them one shred of an excuse to lock me up in that vault again.