

MIRIAM AND ESTHER

Miriam was hospitalized after her mother called the police because she feared Miriam might hurt both of them. Miriam claimed she was age 56 and lived with her 76-year-old "assumed" or "estranged" mother, Esther, and her 12-year-old daughter, Alice. She described Esther as a family friend who had given her and her daughter a room some years ago, but who had increasingly angered her by acting as a mother and a grandmother, invading her privacy, attacking her in her sleep, and jealously turning Alice against her.

According to the patient, domestic squabbling had threatened to become violent on the night of admission, causing Esther to send her to the hospital "for hygiene." The patient expected to leave as soon as the ward social worker could relocate her and Alice in a "condominium or other suitable environment in which to rear my own child, who is coming of age as a young lady." She admitted to a recent sense of confusion, but denied sleep and appetite changes, mood disturbance, and hallucinations. However, she did describe a "whooshing" sound in her "cranium" intermittently over the past several years, which she felt resulted from fluid in her ear; at other times she had felt "very aware" of her own thoughts, but denied hearing voices.

Miriam gave a vague but complex history, as follows: She was born 56 years ago in Italy. Her "biologic parents" (as she put it), Louise and William, were wealthy from oil. They took her to their country house in Mt. Vernon, New York, where she spent her childhood. Esther, a family friend, visited often. Miriam recalled people driving Packards and Rolls Royces. She stated she later lived in Europe and North Africa, and was present in Hiroshima when the atom bomb was dropped. This event left her with a steel plate in her head and an "atom brain." She lived with Louise and William from 1957 to 1968. She said that she had had three husbands and seven children. Her youngest, Alice, fathered by her last husband, was born in 1968, 4 years after his death. When asked how this could be, she explained that a "tubal infection" had delayed the baby's conception in a "technical way."

According to Miriam, after the birth of Alice she moved in with Esther and enrolled at Hunter College in a special program for middle-aged students, where she excelled in Romance languages. She became an alcoholic, consuming up to a pint of whiskey daily. Once when she didn't drink, she became shaky and broke into a sweat. Following the death in 1973 of her "biologic mother," Louise, Miriam became depressed and lost weight. A "nervous breakdown" landed her in a state mental hospital for 3 months, where she stopped drinking and improved with medication. For several years thereafter, a local "mental hygiene" clinic gave her medication for "stability," including Prolixin (an antipsychotic), which made her hair fall out. Since then she had worked steadily, first for the Board of Education, and then as a home health aide. For the past year she had remained home to care for her child.

Miriam's mother, Esther, related a quite different history, corroborated by family members and clinic staff. Miriam is actually 30. Esther is 56 and is, in fact, her biological mother. When Miriam was 7, her father walked out on the family. The next year she and her older sister were sent, probably for financial reasons, to Mt. Vernon to live with Esther's middle-class Aunt Louise and Uncle William. Esther visited on weekends.

Miriam was a good student, but had few friends and kept to herself. In 1968, at 17, she became pregnant by a cousin from Trinidad, whom she never saw again. She finished high school but, ashamed, returned to her mother's home to have the baby. Esther cared for them both and took responsibility for rearing her granddaughter, Alice. Miriam attended night classes in business skills for 2 years at Hunter College, but did poorly. She then worked for a year as a home health aide, but quit because she

thought people were against her. She began to hear voices that commented about her actions, and was finally admitted to a state hospital in 1973, where she improved with medication. The voices ceased several months after discharge. She lived at home and worked occasionally as a secretary, but failed a stenography and typing course.

In 1977 her mother paid for Miriam to have her own apartment. Miriam mismanaged her money and was evicted after a year. The stress apparently caused her to become psychotic again (details are not known). She moved back to her mother's and improved greatly on antipsychotics. She worked inconsistently for a year, again as a home health aide, but then stopped her medication and quit work. She began to call her mother Esther rather than Mother, and began to say she was not her real mother. Friction developed because of Esther's disappointment in Miriam and Miriam's jealousy of the continued mothering role taken by Esther toward Miriam's child. The child clearly preferred Esther.

Miriam spent more time alone in her room, friendless, venturing out only for shopping trips, during which she would spend her disability check on expensive clothes. Relatives say she was often belligerent when talking about her mother. She became unkempt and unable to help with the household chores. She began yelling at imaginary people to leave her alone and not touch her. On several occasions, by the time police had been summoned, Miriam had calmed down. However, the night of admission she was out of control, threatening to throw herself and her mother out the window, and was forcibly handcuffed and brought to the hospital.

Miriam's mental status in numerous interviews was characterized by calm, socially appropriate behavior. She was obese and homely, but tastefully dressed. Speech and movement were of normal tempo and quantity. Her affect was constricted, although at times she seemed pedantic and slightly haughty. Contained anger and sarcasm were apparent during a joint interview with her mother. Thought processes were slightly loose, vague, and circumstantial. Most striking was her odd language, ranging from idiosyncratic usage—"my assumed mother," "my estranged mother"—to neologisms ("Medicine makes me incognizant. . . I am not correlative enough. . . My mother does not accreditize me. . . The hospital will have my records if they are consortive. . . My cousin was a devasive schizoid").

When confronted with inconsistencies in her account of her life, Miriam only smiled or giggled. While hospitalized she admitted neither to

currently hearing the "whooshing" sound nor to any hallucinations. Nurses reported that when unknowingly observed, she acted as if she were aware of nonexistent beings.