2
Mental Health

The Psychiatric Pick

A few blocks from the corner of Washington and Second, east up a steep hill, sits Harborview Medical Center, a brown fortress-like complex that is King County's hospital for those considered mentally ill. It seems to loom over the mudflat and, from the 1930s through the 1960s, it loomed in the imagination of the city's homosexuals. Frances Farmer arrived there on March 21, 1944, but not willingly. Earlier in the morning, she had been grabbed by three hospital attendants, straitjacketed, and thrown screaming into a van.

Born thirty years earlier while her parents were living on Seattle's Capitol Hill, Farmer had grown up a tomboy in West Seattle, across the Duwamish River from the mudflat, and as a child she had enjoyed playing kick-the-can into the late evening hours. She liked hiking in the Olympic Mountains and once, in 1941 after she had moved to Hollywood, she even drove by herself from California to hike alone near Sol Duc Hot Springs, out of sight of the movie cameras and the news cameras that by then had become her life. Many of those who met her, both as a teen and as an adult, would almost invariably comment about how little she seemed to care for the traditionally feminine clothing people expected her to wear, especially since she could appear so beautifully feminine in the publicity photos that had accompanied her rise to Hollywood stardom. Given the chance, she ignored her dresses and opted for blue jeans and work shirts. One famous wire-service photograph of her, taken at a time when she was running from her mother and from the psychiatrists, shows her looking especially hardened and masculine, clad in overalls and an army shirt and grasping a cigarette in her left hand. The news story about her that time quoted her as saying, "I want to be strong enough to fight for myself."

Throughout her years at West Seattle High School, she had showed little interest in boys. No one seems to remember her dating when she attended the University of Washington, either. An autobiography ghostwritten years later by her closest friend, a woman, said, "I accepted dates only when I needed someone to take me to a special event. They soon learned not to paw, and any adolescent attempt at lovemaking resulted in a tongue-lashing that sent them scampering." A movie magazine reported that she had once written a letter in 1935 about her experience with men in Hollywood in which she said, "I prefer my own company to that of most of the men in this town. If they want to pass me by, that's all right with me." She

added, "If I couldn't stand my own company, I'd be the unhappiest girl in the world, because I'm alone, morning, noon, and night."

Farmer waited for two days at Harborview. Under Washington law, family members were allowed to file complaints that could lead to involuntary commitment for mental observation. Psychiatrists could then determine whether those detained needed treatment for any of a wide variety of symptoms, with the treatments ranging from simple counseling to drug therapies to those designed to physically shock the body, through either electricity or plunges into cold water. The treatments could be done at Harborview or, if it seemed that a longer period of therapy was required, at a state mental asylum about thirty miles south of Seattle. There, the treatments could be even more extreme.

In Farmer's case, her mother, Lillian, had filed the complaint. She claimed the actress had refused to work anymore in Hollywood, that she was depressed, and that she was becoming violent. On March 23, Farmer was taken to her hearing before two psychiatrists, Drs. Don Nicholson and George Price. According to a *Seattle Times* story, Lillian Farmer told the two that her daughter had "turned the radio up loudly, which I knew would annoy the neighbors. I asked her to turn it down and she became quite angry, grabbed my wrists and pushed me into a chair."

"I realize," Lillian Farmer continued, "that she needs institutional care, as I am entirely unable to control her at home."

Nicholson and Price asked Frances Farmer a series of questions. According to the *Times* story, the doctors said that she was "voluble and at times rambling." They also noted that while at home with her mother, Farmer had "started drinking [and had become] agitated and delusional." The two psychiatrists thought the delusions indicated that she was "paranoid" and concluded that she was suffering from schizophrenia.

For the cause, they looked to her previous emotional and sexual life. While in Hollywood, Farmer had eloped with an actor named William Anderson—his better-known stage name was Leif Erikson—but the marriage, while pleasing to Hollywood publicists, had lasted only about three years. In her autobiography, *Will There Really Be a Morning,* Farmer would call the marriage a mistake. "I neither loved him, nor was in love with him," the book said. "He was simply an attractive childlike man who seemed to want to understand me. . . . I considered him totally dull. In my mind he had become the youngest pup in a crowded litter, and I could find no place for him to fit. I was miserably unhappy and deeply discontented."

Nicholson and Price concluded that "marital difficulty is said to be a pre-disposing cause of the insanity." The next day, a King County superior court judge committed Frances Farmer to Western State Hospital, the state mental asylum.[1]

If the first method of constructing Seattle's sexual minorities as a group of outcasts was the use of law, the second was a mental health rhetoric founded on psychiatry. As members of a young medical profession that emerged during the

nineteenth century, psychiatrists quickly set up classifications determining which behaviors and passions could be considered normal and which were abnormal. Although the classifications might have been well intentioned, sometimes they simply reinforced nonmedical moral choices, so that those who veered from the expected norms for sex or for acting in an appropriately masculine or feminine way might find themselves declared sick. The American Psychiatric Association, in its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual,* would eventually define homosexuality as a sociopathic personality disturbance, but psychiatric patients also included women who wore men's clothing or vice versa, those who masturbated too much, or those who felt guilty or angry because they engaged in any behavior that somehow did not live up to the expectations of respectability.

Just as the legal rhetoric against homosexuality had its most extreme weapon—prosecution for sodomy—psychiatry also developed its most extreme cure, the lobotomy, used primarily during the 1940s and 1950s. As with the sodomy law, it was the force of rhetoric and imagination, in this case about homosexuals being "sick," that created an exile disproportionate to the number of attempted "cures."[2]

Tracking exactly what happened to specific individuals in Seattle as the medical definitions were deployed remains a future task for the city's historians. It is a difficult one for two reasons: First, personal medical records are confidential, and second, the diagnostic terms used in what few records are public mostly seem to refer to the symptoms that were to be treated rather than mentioning homosexuality itself. "Sodomy" initially defined an expansive range of sexual behaviors with little in common other than society's disapproval, and psychiatric terms such as "dementia praecox" and "involutional melancholia," referring to schizophrenia and depression, were applied to the emotional behaviors of widely varying individuals. Sometimes the only hint of a cause, rather than a symptom, is a phrase like "failed to make heterosexual adjustment" or, as in the Farmer case, "marital difficulties"—but of course those could refer not only to homosexuals but also to heterosexuals.

One early example of the medical rhetoric in Seattle occurred indirectly in the sodomy case that George Vanderveer pursued against Frederick Evans in 1910. In attempting to discredit Evans's accuser, the defense attorney pointed out that medical personnel believed that "persons addicted to the habits, practices and courses of the complaining witnesses are of unsound mind and incompetent to testify." The defense attorney was referring to accuser Dan Paxman's homosexuality and his "habits" of dressing as a female impersonator in the mudflat's vaudeville theaters. The medical personnel the attorney referred to are not named, so he may simply have been referring to general beliefs already accepted in Seattle. Apparently, the jury agreed with his argument about Paxman's credibility.[3]

As for those committed to Western State Hospital, located at Steilacoom, the admission entries for the inmates registered there between 1916 and the late 1940s suggest a link between unacceptable morality in sex and the diagnoses for men-

tal illness, even if the sexual orientation of the patient is not clear. There was George Kincaid, for example, committed in 1916 at the age of seventeen for masturbating. And Fred Schlig, admitted at age twenty-two in 1916 and kept for more than two years, also for masturbating. Carl Sundling, a twenty-one-year-old delivery boy from King County, was deemed schizophrenic in 1917 because of masturbation and died at the asylum twelve years later. Albert Kohlmorgan, a twenty-six-year-old painter, was diagnosed as paranoid because of his masturbation. Annie Walton, a twenty-three-year-old art designer, was admitted in 1918 for four months because of her masturbation, which had caused her to become depressed. In later records, only the new psychiatric identities are listed next to names—catatonia, paranoia, schizophrenia, involutional melancholia—making it impossible to determine what the psychiatrists thought were the causes. Sexual minorities were invisibly scattered among a variety of individuals who showed similar symptoms.[4]

The young men committed to Western in the earlier years of the century almost inevitably listed their occupations as something at the lower end of the economic scale—as painters or delivery boys for example. Perhaps those better off would have been sent to private psychiatrists. Not surprisingly, the admissions record also notes several escape attempts by inmates who had been committed as insane because of masturbation.

The story of Frances Farmer's involuntary commitment to Western State in 1944 has become something of an underground urban legend in Seattle, appealing in particular to those who feel the city itself has remained seriously schizophrenic in its utopian dream of creating a "city beautiful" to match the natural environment by controlling citizens who do not fit the vision. Every decade since her death in 1970, Farmer's story has resurfaced. In the 1970s came Farmer's autobiography, an investigative book titled *Shadowland* by *Post-Intelligencer* reporter William Arnold, and a rebuttal by Farmer's sister, Edith Farmer Elliott, *Look Back in Love.* In the 1980s, the films and stage productions arrived: a Hollywood biography called *Frances* that starred Jessica Lange, a television miniseries, a documentary, and two New York plays. In the 1990s, Seattle's famous grunge rock group Nirvana enshrined the actress in a song titled "Frances Farmer Will Have Her Revenge on Seattle." In it, the band's lead singer, Kurt Cobain, referred to Farmer as "our favorite patient" who had shown a "display of patience" for "disease-covered Puget Sound." The actress, the band warned, would "come back as fire, to burn all the liars, and leave a blanket of ash on the ground."

Like any good Hollywood movie, Farmer's story has lent itself to multiple layers of interpretation by vastly different audiences. For gays and lesbians in Seattle, the story became emblematic of their own struggle against the city's mental health system, particularly as it intertwined with a story about a psychiatrist named Walter Freeman, who became one of the leading proponents of loboto-

mies and made repeated visits to the state mental asylum while Farmer was incarcerated there. In 1979, for example, the lesbian newspaper in the city, *Out and About,* recounted Farmer's story with pages of details, matching it with a story about another woman who had been involuntarily committed to Western State, as if to remind gay women in the city of the threat they had faced if they were found dressing inappropriately, speaking inappropriately, or entering into inappropriate relationships.

Farmer's story went like this:

She was strong-willed and strongly opinionated, particularly for a woman of the 1930s. She served as president of the debate club at West Seattle High, not surprising since her father was an attorney. As a high school student, she read essays by Nietzsche and then wrote an essay of her own telling how, as a child, she prayed to God to help her find a misplaced hat. God had helped, but then an accident killed a classmate's parents. In the essay, Farmer wondered why a god would respond to trivia like lost hats but allow tragedy. She concluded that God was really quite a "useless thing," someone who "stayed in heaven and pretended not to notice." "God," she wrote, "was gone." Her teacher thought the essay so well written that she submitted it to a national contest, and when it won a first prize of one hundred dollars, Seattle newspapers published headlines like "Seattle girl denies God and wins prize." Furious Christians in the city denounced the sixteen-year-old as an example of atheism and paganism and wondered why the city's school system would encourage such rebellious thinking.

In 1931, Farmer enrolled as a student at the University of Washington. One magazine article written about her a quarter-century later noted that while at the university she had sometimes dressed in a plaid boy's shirt, with a rolled collar open at the neck and her tightly cut hair "slicked back, masculine style." Initially she studied journalism, but soon became intrigued by a fellow student described in her autobiography as "the girl reporter from the Drama Department." The woman, according to the autobiography, clothed herself "with a special flair" and cropped her hair in a boy's bob. "She moved like a stalking lioness," the autobiography says, and she was "involved with" another female drama student that Farmer thought "strikingly feminine."

Although lesbians were not highly visible on the university campus in the 1930s, they were beginning to have certain safe places where they could meet. Historian Lillian Faderman, in her study of lesbian life in twentieth-century America, quoted one woman as saying that she and other lesbians regularly gathered at a certain table in the university commons each day. They were discreet. As the woman Faderman interviewed said, "You didn't belong if you were the blabbermouth type."[5]

One night, Farmer accompanied the two lesbian lovers from the drama department to a local "black and tan," one of the African American bars that nourished Seattle's blues and jazz musicians and drew audiences of young blacks and whites

either into the city's Central District or down to the mudflat. There, Farmer met a powerful woman who would change her life, a U.W. drama instructor named Sophie Rosenstein who just then was in her mid-twenties. Although married to a businessman who sold women's hats, Rosenstein was in no way hobbled to him; her ideas about a woman's role encompassed much more than the home. At a later meeting between the two women, Rosenstein decided to convince Farmer to go on stage. She reached across the table, picked up Farmer's hand, pressed it against her cheek, and then said, "You've got everything you'll ever need. Look at you. You're beautiful."

When Farmer objected that she knew nothing about acting, Rosenstein supposedly replied with passion, "I'll teach you. You've got a voice, a fabulous instrument. Use it. Make it come alive. Capture with it. Love with it. Live with it."

Finally, Farmer felt she belonged somewhere. "I was alive for the first time in my life, functioning in a world that was young and intent on experimentation"—and then the book adds suggestively, "whether in a scene on stage or in a bed."

Rosenstein promoted a realistic approach to acting that was inspired by Konstantin Stanislavsky of the Moscow Art Theater, called simply "the method." In a 1936 book she coauthored, Rosenstein explained that acting meant re-creating "the inner life of the character" and bringing all of the character's "thoughts, sensations, perceptions and emotions" to bear.[6] Farmer's autobiography intriguingly describes the training this way: "If our characters were sleeping together, we slept together. If homosexuality was involved in a characterization, we were likewise involved, for how could you act what you had not experienced?"

Farmer's most memorable success at U.W. came in a play called *Alien Corn,* produced in December 1934. She played a music instructor at an all-women's college who wanted desperately to achieve her ambition of going to Vienna, but was thwarted by male interference. Preparing for the play, she seemed to discover something about herself. "I had a great deal of difficulty separating my own personality from that of the character," the autobiography says. "I was as much Elsa Brandt as I was Frances Farmer."

"I began to sense a dual faculty within me. The prospect of this schizoid condition was fascinating, but it also left me uneasy and frightened."

If the critics in the audience noticed, it only heightened their appreciation. One review was in the *Seattle Times,* written by Virginia Boren, a descendant of one of Seattle's original pioneer families that had become part of the city's elite. Boren exuded confidence about Farmer's future, using the royal "we" to convey her blessings. "Miss Frances Farmer, we predict, will go a long way. We are not clairvoyant, but we do feel that her name will be in electric lights. . . . She has a something, that divine intangible something, without which an actress is a hack."[7]

While Farmer studied, the 1929 depression crumpled the Northwest even more severely than the panic of 1893 had. Seattle turned into a hotbed for both the labor movement and, as had occurred after the panic, a moral backlash, this time embod-

ied in a group called the American Vigilantes of Washington. The vigilantes charged that Communists had penetrated the Northwest's unions and schools. They provoked arrests of anyone they considered agitators, they destroyed bookstores, they burned books with which they disagreed. Soon enough, university students were speaking out against them and distributing leaflets in favor of union workers.

In the midst of this turmoil, Farmer's friends decided to help send her to New York City to meet with members of what was then one of the most influential organizations in American drama, the Group Theater.[8] The drama students entered a subscription contest run by Seattle's activist newspaper, the *Voice of Action,* which was operated by dissident U.W. students. Farmer's friends sold subscriptions in her name, winning for her the first prize of a ten-day trip to Russia via New York City. The headlines began again. Seattle's YMCA refused to allow the newspaper to hold its awards banquet at the downtown building. Farmer's mother publicly protested her daughter's decision, but Frances was twenty-one by then and could not be stopped. Frances kept repeating that she was not a Communist and just wanted to visit the Group Theater, as well as the famed Moscow Art Theater. A photograph in the *Seattle Times* even showed her typing out a story entitled "Why I am Going to Russia."[9]

Her explanations did little to appease her critics. Among them was a conservative Seattle lawyer named John Frater, who repeatedly denounced her in several speeches. But Farmer went to Russia anyway. The moral vigilantes, according to Arnold's *Shadowland,* warned they would never forget her, and Frater in particular would take a crucial role in her story.

After the Moscow trip, in October 1935, Farmer was invited to join Paramount Studios in Hollywood. The *Seattle Times* on October 29 printed two pictures of her. One, described as being taken "as Seattle knew her" just before she left for Russia, showed a rather sullen Farmer, her hair tightly cropped in a masculine style and her eyes looking seriously across her left shoulder. The other, taken "as Hollywood knows her," showed a face-front, smiling Frances Farmer, her hair curled and brightly springy, her eyes radiantly youthful, her lips deeply lipsticked. The *Times* called it a "study of contrasts," and the newspaper seemed clearly delighted by the makeover. "What a difference Hollywood makes!" the caption exclaimed. Farmer, it explained, was now "one of the seven girls who are most likely to become the star of tomorrow." Another *Times* headline, in early 1936, praised her as the "U.W. girl" who had won an "ingénue lead."[10]

Frances Farmer was already a created character who could embody all of the city's schizophrenic visions of itself.

In 1936, just after Farmer went to Hollywood, the psychiatric profession acquired a new tool, a form of psychosurgery called the prefrontal lobotomy, introduced in the United States by two East Coast doctors, James Watt and Walter Freeman.

Watt was a neurosurgeon; Freeman was a psychiatrist who until then had been using the older methods of counseling, straitjackets, and drugs.

The problem with mental patients, Freeman often said, was that their fantasies became too charged by powerful, shifting emotions. The cure was to disconnect the two, since a fantasy unfueled by emotion would be harmless. In his writings Freeman called it "smashing the fantasy life."[11] At first, the separation was made by drilling burr holes through the scalp and using a blunt knife to slice apart the neural connections between the brain cells that controlled emotions and those that created the imagination. The successfully lobotomized patient ended up with flattened emotions and typically lacked either creativity or the passion to pursue goals. At least any schizophrenia, paranoia, melancholy, or tension was relieved. For Freeman, success was measured by whether patients could leave the asylum and hold jobs—usually as something like sales clerks or receptionists—and whether they could get married and raise families. As for the failures who had to remain at the asylums, they were at least easier to control.

Initially, the operation was extreme enough to be used only as a possible cure for the most intransigent of mental patients, such as those who were prone to violence or who had been through every other form of treatment psychiatrists had to offer. Eventually, it began to be considered as a way to cure nonviolent mental patients, including those whose symptoms stemmed from problems with sexual adjustment.

In the mid-1940s, Freeman initiated a new, easier technique called a transorbital lobotomy. He included a sketch of the operation with an article he published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* in April 1949. In it, a hand grasps the bridge of a patient's nose to hold the head steady. A slender ice pick with a looped handle extends from below the patient's chin past the tip of the nose into the bony top of the eye socket and on into the brain, almost reaching the top of the skull. No drilling was necessary. Freeman described the procedure to a *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reporter in 1949: "I lift the upper eyelid and insert a sharp instrument. The instrument is driven through the roof of the eye socket to a depth of about two inches. Then, I move the instrument so as to cut across the nerve connections between the centers for imagination in the front part of the brain and the centers for emotions in the center of the brain, thereby divorcing the imagination from the emotions as they concern self. The operation does not disturb emotion and imagination as regards other things."[12]

The only visual result was a temporary black eye. To hide it, Freeman provided dark sunglasses. The ease of the technique made it possible, he argued, for the ordinary psychiatrist to administer lobotomies without the attending services of a neurosurgeon. His own neurosurgeon colleague, Watts, parted with him at that point, feeling that any poking in the brain required surgical training, but Freeman was not to be stopped. During the 1940s and 1950s, he became an evangelist for transorbital lobotomies, enthusiastically proclaiming in his book that "psychosurgery

has come of age."[13] At least twenty thousand transorbital lobotomies would be performed in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Freeman found his converts particularly among the harried administrators of overcrowded insane asylums. In 1947, he arrived at one of the most pressured of those institutions—Western State Hospital at Steilacoom. Even though Freeman's own home asylum on the East Coast was beginning to have reservations about the doctor's zeal for his new transorbital technique, the psychiatrists at Western State agreed to let him introduce the practice on the West Coast. By that time the institution had acquired a reputation, with the *Tacoma Times,* for example, blasting its often overcrowded conditions as a "naked idol of barbarity" even as early as the 1920s. Every decade brought an unsettling litany of newspaper clips, all with interchangeable headlines about promises of reform that never came. In the asylum's own annual reports during the 1940s, the only consistently cheery note was not about the hospital itself but about the two-hundred-acre farm next door where Western maintained a herd of Holstein dairy cattle. In 1948, when the hospital was perhaps in its very worst years, a state investigator boasted that one of the cows was the world's greatest milk producer. That, he said, was an example of the asylum's "efficiency and zeal." Less an example, apparently, was the fact that the medical staff was quitting at a rate of thirty-three a month, which meant a 100 percent turnover each year.[14]

In his writings, Freeman did not explicitly say that lobotomies could cure an individual's underlying sexual orientation, but he did recognize that lobotomy emasculated the passion to be homosexual. In the 1942 edition of *Psychosurgery,* for example, he wrote that he had not yet "knowingly undertaken the operation on any overt homosexual" and so could not "report upon the possible alteration brought about in this type of case." But in the second edition, published in 1950, he noted that many schizophrenics exhibited latent homosexuality. (He does not seem to have wondered about the possibility that homosexuals had been driven to mental illness by the need to appear heterosexual.) Freeman urged doctors to use lobotomies to cure the schizophrenia and consequently eliminate homosexual inclinations. By 1973, he was writing that "many instances of latent homosexuality have been relieved of their preoccupations and ideas of reference so that the patients regained equanimity."

"It would appear," he added in an incredible understatement, "that homosexuality is of little practical importance after frontal lobotomy."[15]

One specific operation that he performed on a homosexual involved a patient known in his studies as Case 465, a male physician whom Freeman described as "brilliant." Because of the guilt and shame the physician felt about his homosexuality, he was suicidal, Freeman said. Using the suicidal tendencies as his rationale, Freeman operated rather than trying to help the patient see that the guilt and shame were caused by society's feelings about homosexuality. The lobotomy effectively separated the patient's thoughts about suicide from the emotional will

In the 1940s, lobotomies became the extreme cure for those judged to be mentally ill, including homosexuals. One of the country's leading lobotomists, Dr. Walter Freeman, performs a transorbital lobotomy at Western State Hospital in Steilacoom, July 1949. *(Seattle Post-Intelligencer Collection, Museum of History and Industry, Seattle)*

to implement them. It also, Freeman reported, turned sex into something that "as a whole meant little to him."

Interestingly, in the follow-up interviews, Case 465 did not remember the lobotomy ever having occurred. That loss of memory was a side effect, Freeman noted.

One final reference to Case 465, in an article published in 1973, makes it clear that not all turned out well in the psychiatrist's opinion. The lobotomy pick had gone too far into 465's brain and had "trespassed on posterior regions and probably the temporal lobe." Freeman cryptically noted that 465 "failed to make a good adjustment," perhaps meaning that he still desired men. Freeman also conceded that one other homosexual whom he had lobotomized had appeared to meet the criteria for success—he married and fathered five children—but throughout his life he continued to feel that his only real loves had been three other men.[16]

At first Frances Farmer was a stunning success in Hollywood. She completed fourteen movies before she turned twenty-nine in 1942. Hollywood columnist Louella Parsons wrote that Farmer would be "as great, and probably greater, than Garbo."

Her most successful film came quickly, a 1936 Samuel Goldwyn production called *Come and Get It* in which—appropriately for her Northwest roots—Farmer played a saloon girl courted by a lumber baron and his son. She had a beautiful voice, and critics relished her rendition of an old romantic song called "Aura Lea."

In 1937 she starred with Cary Grant in *The Toast of New York,* and it was in that film that she seems to have begun to feel the most pain of the divided life she was leading. Describing the film in her autobiography, Farmer wrote that the original story for the movie excited her because it told about Jim Fisk and his mistress Josie Mansfield, who had dominated Wall Street in the 1860s. Mansfield, metaphorically, was like Seattle. She had been, the autobiography says, a "designing harlot" but "also a woman of pathos in her desire for respectability." Farmer wanted to play the conflict in the character, but "instead of a cheap vixen" the studio wanted "an ingénue fresh from Sunnybrook." Farmer rebelled, arguing, getting into what the book called "verbal knockdown battles with the writers." She even publicly belittled the film. Ultimately she lost, and "Josie Mansfield was safely tucked into a chastity belt."

Always an individualist, Farmer kept rebelling, refusing to trade her old jalopy for a fancy car, to keep her eyebrows plucked, or to wear glittering dresses instead of the boyish sweaters and jeans she preferred. A 1937 *Movie Mirror* story noted that Frances was "a beauty who isn't a devotee of the makeup table." "Away from cameras, she wears no makeup, and so she could gaily go along and haul in fish without any furtive qualms."

By 1942, Farmer could not stand the emotional strain any longer. She and Anderson had separated. In October, she was arrested for drunk driving in a wartime blackout zone and put on probation. In January 1943, police arrested her for violating the probation and took her to the Los Angeles County jail, where she angrily hit one policeman and yelled at matrons before being strapped into a straitjacket. "Have you ever had a broken heart?" she screamed as she was taken. News reports at the time interpreted that as a comment about the separation from her husband, but given the later statements in the autobiography, it is more likely that something else had broken her heart. When a judge asked whether she had been drinking, Farmer defiantly replied, "Yes, I drank everything I could get, including Benzedrine . . . I get liquor in my orange juice—in my coffee. Must I starve to death to obey your laws?"

Farmer was jailed, but not before yelling at the judge, "I haven't any lawyer. What I want to know is do I have any civil rights?"

That night, Farmer slept in her cell, exhausted. The next morning, according to another wire-service story, she was quite calm. She drank a cup of jail coffee, which, the story said, "she eyed with distinct disdain," and she asked the jailer, "Well, where are the instruments? When are you going to torture me? I thought you would brand me with a hot iron." The same day, her sister-in-law, Ruth, employed a psychiatrist and filed a complaint asking for a sanity hearing. Farmer

was quickly shipped to the psychopathic ward at the L.A. General Hospital. Once again, news reports said she remained calm at the hospital. Ruth Farmer helpfully volunteered to the press that she thought Frances knew "she was ill, but did not have the courage to ask for help."

The courts eventually assigned her mother as guardian, and Farmer first spent several months at a psychiatric hospital in California. Judging from news reports, she had already calmed even before she was transferred, but she was now drugged and given insulin shock treatments, according to Arnold's account. When her mother finally pulled her from the hospital to return to Seattle in April 1943, a psychiatrist declared success. "She now is the same Frances Farmer you knew when she first came to Hollywood," he told a reporter for the Hearst news service.

But, of course, she wasn't.

One of the debates about Frances Farmer has been whether she should be considered heterosexual or lesbian. Farmer herself never claimed to be a lesbian, and as a Hollywood film star, she played decidedly heterosexual roles. *Frances,* the 1982 Hollywood film about Farmer, went to great lengths to portray her as heterosexual, including the creation of a fictional male character who supposedly loved her, and she him. Yet her autobiography disdained all the heterosexual relations in which she was involved. She eventually married three times, but each marriage lasted only a few years. Arnold speculated in *Shadowland* that the energetic creativity that drove the talented, often rebellious actress was "a latent homosexuality that never quite made it to the surface." After her death in 1970, at a time when gay activism was fervent, some claimed Farmer had been a closeted lesbian and pointed to the fact that her autobiography, for example, appeared to have been written mostly by her close female friend Jean Ratcliffe. The book describes the deep love she shared with Ratcliffe, of whom Farmer supposedly said, "I was given a friend and finally a family." Ratcliffe was "my most cherished friend," and in Farmer's final years the two shared a country house with thirteen cats, a dog, and a set of visiting nieces. As presented in the book, it was the only truly joyful relationship in Farmer's whole life. However, as critics of the book have pointed out, it seems to have been written mostly by Ratcliffe after Farmer died, and so it is difficult to determine how much of the characterization is Farmer's and how much is Ratcliffe's.

After Farmer died, her sister, Edith Elliott, denounced the Ratcliffe book in a letter to the *Indianapolis News* as "lesbian pornography fiction [full of] filthy lies."

Farmer's sexual relations may have been so distorted by the stresses of her life that it is probably impossible at this point to know her actual orientation. Part of the difficulty of naming it lies with how the definition of "lesbian" evolved over the decades. Arnold wrote his book in the 1970s, a decade influenced by the notion of "coming out" and of lesbians having genital sex with each other. Farmer, though, was a product of the attitudes of the 1920s and 1930s, when, as historian Lillian Faderman has pointed out, it was more common for women who loved other

women to frame their relationships as a type of romantic friendship that did not necessarily include sexual affection and did not call itself "lesbian." There was Sarah Yesler, for example, and Eliza Hurd, with Hurd writing passionate letters about sleeping and bathing together, although both women remained in marriages and never publicly used words like "homosexual" to refer to themselves.

At the very least, as indicated by *Out and About*'s decision to retell the story in so much detail in 1979, Farmer became for many lesbian women a symbol of resistance.

When she died, the only pallbearers would be six women who had become her family.

After Farmer left the hospital in California, she convalesced for a while in Nevada and then, by early 1944, returned to Seattle. That was when she had the fateful encounter with her mother that led to the March 23, 1944, hearing at Harborview.

The morning after Drs. Nicholson and Price gave their report, it went to a King County Superior Court judge, the same one who had signed the initial complaint that Lillian Farmer had filed against her daughter and that had resulted in the forced trip to Harborview. His name was John A. Frater—the same man, Arnold points out, who had once been a member of Seattle's American Vigilantes, the same one who had denounced Farmer for going to Russia. Frater had also selected for the hearing the psychiatrist Nicholson, about whom Arnold wrote that "there seemed to be endless questionable aspects of his practice." Arnold's investigation of Nicholson revealed that after coming to Seattle in 1906, the psychiatrist had committed thousands of people to the state's insane asylum. He had become a pillar of the local psychiatric community, honored as president of the King County Medical Society, the Washington State Medical Association, and the Washington Society for Mental Hygiene. But, according to Arnold, Nicholson apparently thought he could judge sanity on the basis of a few short questions. Once he said he thought Communists were at least "suspect" of being insane. Among those he committed, Arnold suggested, were individuals who were not psychotic at all but rather those whom Nicholson considered politically or socially undesirable in Seattle.

On March 24, after receiving the report from Dr. Nicholson that Frances Farmer was suffering from schizophrenia, it was Judge John Frater who signed the order sending "Mrs. F. E. Anderson"—Frances's married name—to Western State Hospital.

At the Washington State Archives in Olympia, two small gray ledgers make tangible the landscape of fear that once shadowed the lives of homosexuals in Seattle. There are ink stains on the outside covers and seemingly nonsensical scribbles written at random in red ink on the inside of the covers. The individual pages of the ledgers are more carefully inscribed and hold the record of surgeries conducted at

Seattle actress Frances Farmer, whose sexual orientation became a matter of speculation and denial, was Western State Hospital's most famous patient in the 1940s. She reads fan mail while on a temporary release from the hospital in 1944. *(Seattle Post-Intelligencer Collection, Museum of History and Industry, Seattle)*

Western State Hospital from 1942 until 1954. There is the usual list: appendectomies, hemorrhoid treatments, and so forth. But also on the pages—and, chillingly, on almost every page—are the listings of lobotomies performed during those twelve years. There were 252 in all. It is an eerie read through this ledger, with its dates of operations, names of surgeons and assistants, and types of anesthetic used. Almost inevitably the anesthetic of choice was an electric shock to induce a coma prior to the work of disassembling part of the emotional center of the brain. The instructions to the staff nurses giving the "Preparatory Orders for Lobotomy" are handwritten. On the day before, shampoo the head. Then, grant a light supper and give an enema. At 8 P.M. on the night before, administer one and one-half grams of a sedative, Nembutal. At 6 A.M. on the day of the operation, more Nembutal. Then, a morphine compound.

When Walter Freeman arrived at Western State for his first visit in August 1947, beds needed to be cleared, and the doctor from the East offered hope. On August 19, in a display of just how quick and simple his new transorbital technique was, Freeman lobotomized thirteen different patients at Western State Hospital. Eleven

of the patients had been diagnosed as schizophrenic; two were considered manic-depressive. First they were given electroshock as an anesthetic. Then Freeman slid in the ice pick. The ledgers give the patients' names. Five were men: Oren Brown, John Dillaway, Peter Ireland, Henry Robinson, and George Stranger. The other eight were women: Gladys Rodgers, Patricia Hawley, Gloria Alex, Jessie Lancaster, and three named Frances with the last names of DeSellum, Lawder, and Peterson. The final woman was named Ethel Anderson.[17]

After the lobotomies, eleven of Freeman's thirteen demonstration cases were paroled within a month. In a report to the Seattle Neurological Society in February 1948, two Western State doctors, Charles Jones and James Shanklin, detailed the successes on a chart, although they did not list specific names. Among the comments about the individuals lobotomized on August 19 were these: "worked Christmas rush as salesgirl in a department store," "steady worker on family farm," and "makes own living as a cosmetic saleswoman." Of the two patients who did not receive parole, one was a woman in her early thirties who had been diagnosed as schizophrenic. The chart noted that even though she still remained in the hospital, her "vicious behavior [has] disappeared [and she] now quietly embroiders."[18]

Freeman returned in October 1948 to perform three more transorbital lobotomies, and then in July 1949 he joined in another lobotomy day when nine patients had their brains incised, three of them by the famous doctor himself. That time, Freeman invited journalists for the mass demonstration. Photographs from the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* show him in a sleeveless white surgical gown assisted by one of the asylum's own psychiatrists. In the first picture, the Western State physician, Dr. Shanklin, is clamping a horseshoe-like device over a patient's head to deliver the electric shock that would induce a coma. In the second, the bald-headed and goateed Freeman taps his ice pick into a patient's eye socket while several men look on. Doctors from two other Washington State asylums had come there that day and they enthusiastically promised to adopt the ice pick method at their hospitals.

In 1951, Freeman was back to complete seven more transorbitals.

In between Freeman's visits, Western's own doctors busily practiced the techniques he had taught them. For example, between Freeman's visit in August 1947 and Christmas of that year, thirteen additional transorbital lobotomies were performed, along with nineteen of the regular prefrontal lobotomies.

Each transorbital lobotomy averaged only about seven minutes.

At first Frances Farmer stayed only three months at Western State, and then the psychiatrists pronounced her cured and released her in July 1944. The *Post-Intelligencer* announced that she was "in glowing health" and published a photograph of her at her mother's home, curled on a couch reading fan letters. Once again, though, she was under her mother's control and her mother's insistence that she return to Hollywood to play a role that never fit. She instead ran, was caught

in California, and then stayed at an aunt's house in Nevada. She returned to Seattle in April 1945. By May, her mother had her recommitted to the asylum. There she would stay for most of the next five years, from 1945 until 1950, the same period during which Freeman was visiting.

Her autobiography describes days when she was stripped naked or tied to a toilet and forced into it. Other days, it says, attendants connected electrodes to her temples, gagged her, and then switched on the electricity and watched her convulse and bounce on the table until she passed out. She was cast into tubs of frigid water day after day—the infamous hydrotherapy used to level a patient's emotions and resistance. Her autobiography claims she was left in the water for ten hours sometimes rather than the prescribed three. Once, it says, she chewed her lower lip off because she was in so much pain.

In her autobiography, she also claimed to have been "gnawed on by rats and poisoned by tainted food." By 1947, she was being fed experimental drugs that would later become commonly used tranquilizers in psychiatric hospitals across the country—Prolixin, Thorazine, Stelazine.

She claimed she knew all along that she was not insane. It was her own schizoid abilities, her talent at detaching and watching herself play a role that she said saved her. Arnold noted in *Shadowland* that a student nurse once visited Farmer several times and sent a report saying the actress was not insane at all. The student was quickly transferred.

Then quite suddenly, after 1949, Farmer's mental condition improved, and according to a medical record quoted in the autobiography and in *Shadowland* she suddenly turned "cooperative." The report said, "She sits in a corner with a blanket covering her head, but she has learned to answer pleasantly." By spring 1950, Farmer was paroled. Even Farmer herself professed bafflement at the change. In her autobiography, she suggests the turnabout was due to a letter from her parents asking that she be released to care for them in their old age. In 1953, the psychiatrists declared her completely cured and approved the removal of her mother as her guardian, finally restoring Farmer's civil rights.

As with the question of Farmer's sexuality, the circumstances surrounding her "cure" have been a source of speculation and legend making. After Arnold finished his investigation, he concluded that Farmer had forgotten a key part of what happened to her at Steilacoom, perhaps the same thing that Walter Freeman's homosexual Case 465 had forgotten.

Perhaps the asylum's most famous visiting doctor had met its most famous and truculent inmate.

The gray ledger books at the state archives do not list a "Frances Farmer" as one of those who received the operation. Nor do they list any lobotomies of "Mrs. F. E. Anderson," the married name that was used when Frances was registered into Western State. Only that one name in the gray ledgers, the "Ethel Anderson" who was lobotomized during Freeman's first visit, comes suggestively close, since it is

not clear what the "E" in "F. E. Anderson" represented. No legal middle name was ever designated on Farmer's Seattle birth certificate, and none was used on her tombstone. Her nephew David Farmer says the family called her Elena, which is also how her fans refer to her on a popular website established in the late 1990s. Elena was the name of a Russian spy character that Farmer played in a 1930s radio broadcast with Errol Flynn called "British Agent."[19]

On the chart of lobotomy successes that Jones and Shanklin produced for the Seattle Neurological Society, only the account of that one woman in her early thirties who had been diagnosed as schizophrenic and had not been paroled comes close to describing Frances Farmer's situation. But it could also describe one of the other women who had been lobotomized on that day of Freeman's first visit to Western State.

Farmer's sister, Edith Elliott, told a reporter for the *Indianapolis Star* in 1983 that doctors at Western State did indeed want her parents to let Frances be lobotomized, but they refused. According to the sister, they then pressured the hospital to release the actress, which is why she had suddenly been sent home. In a 1990s tabloid television program, however, Walter Freeman's son claimed that his father had told him that, indeed, he had operated on Farmer. The son set the date during Freeman's visit in 1949.[20]

In *Shadowland,* Arnold added to the legend by speculating that the doctor and the actress may have met several times. In all probability, Arnold wrote, Freeman took Farmer to a treatment room out of sight of the reporters and completely out of reach of the little gray ledgers now in the state archives. Freeman, Arnold suggests, sent the orderlies away. He then raised Frances Farmer's right eyelid and with a quick tap of a mallet forced the long slender ice pick into her brain.

It would have taken only about seven minutes.

For Frances Farmer, it may simply be a question of what is the least believable—not the most believable—scenario: that the country's most famous lobotomist passed through Steilacoom and did not try to cure Frances Farmer? Or that he did?

After she left the asylum, Frances Farmer worked sorting laundry and answering telephones as a hotel receptionist. She finished her life in Indianapolis, living with Jean Ratcliffe and for a while hosting a television movie series and even acting again in community plays. In 1970, she died of throat cancer. The autobiography says she found peace and a sense of belonging in her final years. A 1964 *Indianapolis Star* photo showed her sitting casually in a living room chair, flanked by Jean Ratcliffe and another friend, Betty Whitaker. Frances was smiling and Ratcliffe was holding a cat. The caption noted that Frances and Jean had begun a home decorating business.

While the tale of Frances Farmer may be the most emblematic and most remembered among the stories of psychiatric treatment in Seattle, there is another less

glamorous story that may be more representative. The same year Seattle's lesbian newsletter *Out and About* was detailing the Frances Farmer case, 1979, it also recorded a long interview with Jackie Cachero, who like Farmer had been involuntarily committed to Western State. Cachero even referred to Farmer's experience. "You ever read that book by Frances Farmer?" she asked her interviewers. "What she tells you about what went on at Western State Hospital, she's not lying. I'll testify to it. Everything that happened when she was there was still happening while I was there."[21]

Born in 1943 in Bellingham, Cachero spent her first years with a father who beat her mother. Taken away because of her father's violence, Cachero spent the next several years in foster homes separated from her brother and sister as well as from her mother. At one foster home in Seattle, she discovered that "I liked girls." She and the other girls would play and touch while hiding in bushes.

Cachero was told that her mother had died, only to find out it was not true. Once she knew that, Cachero repeatedly ran away from the foster homes to try to find her, finally succeeding in her early teens. By then, though, rebelliousness had set too deeply as a trait.

"Never having spent any time with my mother," Cachero said, "I really didn't have any respect for anybody. So I started going out and drinking and having wild parties . . . getting into fights and stealing cars."

Frustrated, her mother sent her to a reform school, and that was where Cachero figured out her sexual orientation.

"Figure it out? Hell, they told me," she said.

"When I got into the cottage I was assigned to, I happened to see these two [girls] sitting really close on the couch, and the one looked like a dude. I said, 'Oh god, I didn't know they had boys here,' and they all cracked up. . . . They really got off on me because I was really stupid. They had me go put on a pair of Levis and slick my hair back and said 'Yeah, you make a good butch.' That's when I found out that all this holding hands sounded good to me."

At first, she was delighted to have discovered herself.

"Jesus Christ, I was so excited about it, that it was like, god, I don't know. I felt free, and here I was locked up in reform school." One day, her mother visited. "I was happy as a lark. I sat down and told my mom all about it. God. My mom just blew up."

Infuriated, her mother threatened to tell the state authorities regulating the school that her daughter had been turned into a homosexual there. Promptly, the school and her mother committed Cachero to Western State Hospital.

It was 1958 and Cachero was fifteen.

"They transferred me to what they call a 'shit ward,'" she said. "God, the building was so old, you know, the old wood floors, and they even swayed. . . . You walked down to the end of the hall, and there was a window that had big iron bars, painted

black. You could reach through them and raise the window up a little bit—that was the fresh air. So I used to park this rocking chair down there, and I'd rock, and I'd just cry and wish my mom could find me and get me out."

The psychiatrists called her incorrigible.

Cachero did what she had done before. She found a way to escape. But she was caught in Tacoma and returned to a maximum-security ward. Still, she resisted. "I wasn't going to stay up there no longer," she said. She jumped a nurse, got the keys, ran and slid down a canyon, losing her shoes and slicing her legs and feet until they bled. A road crew spotted her and she was soon captured. Confined in the hospital again, she recalled, "They strapped me down in a little tiny room with nothing in it but a hospital bed, and they put these leather straps around my wrists, strung a belt through them, and they had me spread-eagled, my legs tied to the other end of the bed. They had a strap around my waist too. They'd come around and make me use a bedpan, and they'd come in with a tray to eat. . . . But I wouldn't eat . . . [then] they were giving me these goddamn pills, and all of a sudden, I couldn't resist."

Cachero could not recall how long she was strapped to the bed—perhaps two or three weeks, she thought. Once released, the nurses fitted her with leather hobbles that wrapped around her ankles and then hooked together with another belt. "They made it so small that I walked like a chinaman," Cachero said angrily. "And those motherfuckers would rub on my ankles, plus they had me doped up on this shit. . . . I looked just like one of the rest of these old ladies, taking these little tiny steps . . . I can remember being so doped up that I'd just come out of that room in the morning and shuffle over to one of them chairs by the window, and that's where I'd sit all day long."

Happiness about being homosexual had turned into a psychiatric insanity.

Cachero was seventeen by then. The hobbles, she said, wore her ankles raw until she bled.

Fortunately for Cachero, when she turned eighteen in 1961, the medical personnel told her that since she was now an adult, she could leave if she had a place to go.

By then, her mother had remarried and, according to Cachero, the new husband wanted nothing to do with a teenager labeled both incorrigible and homosexual. Nurses at the hospital pooled their money and bought her a bus ticket north.

Cachero made it as far as the mudflat in Seattle. There she did what other homosexual teens had begun to do as early as the 1930s. She went to the corner at Washington and Second and she walked down the stairway into the underground that had once been the People's Theater.