

Chapter 6: Playing the Game

Ninette

It's actually been quite nice to go away and come back and give some further thought to what we were talking about. So if it's OK I'd just like to jump straight in.

Eve

Yeah, yeah. The only thing I'm thinking of, just to like explain where we are aswell...

Ninette

OK. For the context. The visuals. Yeah.

Eve

Cos we're not in your hostel today. We're somewhere quite unique.

Ninette

We are. And this, I think this, if anything, just shows how nice a sort of collection of creative friends that I have. They are super awesome. So essentially where we are right now is a little cove-y type of, it's actually a booth. It's Ryan's booth, who is one of my good friends who plays X amount of instruments, which Eve can see.

So we've got three guitars here, we've got drums, we've got the foam, you know, soundproofing. It's pretty awesome. And it's just awesome to be in this building because Ry's room within the building is within the building of the Ridley Road Social Club, which is like a gem. I've lived in Hackney for X amount of years. I've always just thought, "Oh, what's that? It must just be residential." But no. It literally is a social club for creatives and whoever.

It's nice to be in an environment that they're actually supporting my creative growth. So if I wanna come here and get some practice on my aerial fans, which I'll show you before you go, I'm allowed to use the space when they haven't got events. What more could I ask for?!

Eve

Thank you Ryan for letting us use your recording studio for this, which is pretty impressive. Yeah this is an amazing Victorian warehouse complex right next to Ridley Road Market. And as I was walking through the market on the way here, cos I used to live in Hackney, I was thinking how amazing this bit of London is.

Ninette

Absolutely! It's just got loads of hidden gems like this. It's like every nook and cranny that you can think of there's something that you probably didn't know about. And I love that. Because it's a constant discovery. Like, ah I never knew this! It's a constant ongoing adventure and I like adventure. So yay, Hackney!

Eve

How would you describe Ridley Road Market to someone who is listening to this, who doesn't know the area?

Ninette

Ridley Road Market for me represents a cross section of the community, which is mainly like African, Jamaican, Caribbean. But then, it's not just that, if anything, it shows how cosmopolitan London really is. You can pick up, like I want to say the most randomest thing that I can't think of it. But, I mean fruit, veg, obviously what you'd get in the market. But it's not just that you also get a vibe of like, welcome and belonging for me.

So like, generally speaking, I would be down here if I haven't got work or anything just soaking in the atmosphere. The vibes. Yeah, I just love it. It makes me feel like I'm at home, but outside [laughs]. If that even makes sense. It's got homey vibes for me.

Eve

It's incredible. I just love this area. I'm aware that I've cut you off and detracted you a little bit for where you were going to go. But I felt like I just want to give people a sense of where we are.

Ninette

I'm glad you did. I'm so glad you did. I mean, how could we not speak on all of this? Not even just where we are but the wider outside. But yeah, thank you for bringing me back to, back to where I needed to be.

Eve

No worries. So yeah, you were thinking about what we spoke about last week. We've had a bit of time. I've had another listen to our conversation. I've got my notepad [both laugh]. I've got quite a lot of notes with me, but I wanted to ask you about how it was for you to talk about some of the stuff that we did explore together and where you want to go next.

Ninette

Yeah, of course. And thank you for asking, because after our last talk I think it kind of sunk in. It sort of pulled the plaster off the wound type thing. I mean the plaster's actually non-existent. If anything, it just made me bring my attention to the fact that that is actually a very troubling situation to be in.

So I did think a little bit on how even though it felt a little bit uncomfortable at times rewinding to when it was fresh and just happened, there's a clear difference. So I sat down, and I kind of like, just allowed myself to think about nothing by meditation, and whatever came to me afterwards, hopefully, would shed more light on what it was that we were talking about. And something did come to me. I think there's beauty in being able to leave something and then come back to it with like fresher eyes, fresher approach.

So a key thing that I think that I overlooked in our last conversation was how insight can be dangerous. So, what I mean by that is, we focused quite a lot on the police's role in things, which is definitely fundamental to everything. The police are in a position of power, and they are also responsible for a lot of human beings. Whereas my mum, for example, she's not in the same position of power. However, on the day of the incident, you could see it on a par as her being in a position of power, and not using it very well. Just power without responsibility.

So I mean, my mother and I haven't really had the best of relationships. But I always initially made it a key thing to encourage her to talk about her experiences, mental health related and life experiences. Because I feel like, my mum holds a lot of stuff inside. She doesn't, it's very rare that you would get her talking emotionally about past experiences and stuff that have happened to her to make her the person she is.

So where I'm going with this is the fact that my mum on that day abused her power, I mean her power to use what she knows about me, her own daughter, to negatively impact things. I mean, of course, my mum's aware of the fact that I do smoke weed, of the fact that I do like to drink. I'm a young adult. At the end of the day, I like to enjoy myself. I'm a liberal person. And yeah, those things do help me to liberate my mind.

But then also with that, I think thinking on my mum's role in things made me realise that her having that insight is also what contributed to me being on the receiving end of discrimination by the hands of the police. And also by her as well, because the perception in African culture is that if you smoke weed, then somehow you must have a mental health difficulty, or you're going to develop one and end up in a mental institution.

However, I mean, for me [laughs], I know this isn't about what I'm about to go into so I'm going to touch on it very lightly. For me, the experience that I had with the police, weed actually saved me [laughs] to a certain degree. It helped to minimise my anxiety of being around people in the general public. It helped me to calm down and stop feeling so angry with myself about something that I didn't actually cause or create. But then again, I guess that's open to interpretation. Because some may perceive it as you called the police so you invited this trouble onto your doorstep. But my insight at that

particular point in time was the fact that you call the police when you're in need and when you can't actually do, you need further support, you need additional assistance.

So going back to my mother's role, yeah, I feel that if anything, her role in things has made me see, we're talking a lot about how insight can be positive and insight, if we had more insight then maybe it would enable us to respond to things in a more sort of like clued up manner. But my mum's insight into me was used against me. And this touches on such a broader point, which is the fact that a lot of people are using things such as sectioning, and let's say, yeah we'll just stick with sectioning to make it easier, as a means of attack against people.

So if someone isn't behaving in the way that you would like them to behave, then some people are actually resulting to getting friends and family sectioned. This, again, is not a new phenomenon. I feel this has been going on since sectioning was created, more than likely. Which, again, speaks to injustice. Because if people are utilising services that they don't actually need, then how about those people that actually need that mental health support? Who actually need help with finding out if there is something wrong, if there's a diagnosis or if it can be explained why someone's health has deteriorated in such a way.

I don't know what can be done about it. But I say what can be done, but we're doing something right now by speaking on it. I've come across a lot of people in my mental health work who are on wards, acute psychiatric wards, speaking on things of a similar nature, whereby they feel that it's a timely situation when they end up in a mental health institution. Because it could be that another member of their family wants money from them, or they just don't want them around because they find their behaviour, quote unquote, challenging.

Mental health institutions shouldn't be used as a means to just, you know, black sheep a member of the family. How about you just communicate with them, you know? The only way I can say it is straight. Which is, to be in a mental health institution, a psychiatric ward, when you know yourself that you don't belong there is a very, I want to say troubling but I don't think that even speaks even to 5% of what the experience is like, it's like being transported to a different dimension.

And then you've got a myriad of different people that have got their own different problems, all kind of just like compressed into what seems like a really small space. It's almost like you're, you're fighting for survival. You're fighting to stay balanced in an environment that's very much lopsided. And then you add into the mix the fact that you're there and you shouldn't be there, in my particular instance anyway.

However, as much as it was an unfortunate situation, yes it took me years to recover, and my recovery process is still ongoing, no one can shake my perspective on this. I just think it happened so that I could work effectively within the mental health realm. I mean, yes, it was troubling. And yes, every time that I work with someone and it's relevant for me to bring up my story, because I don't want to detract from theirs or take away from what they're going from, it's a really powerful thing that I've gone through. And it's even more powerful that I'm able to flip reverse it rather than focus on the negatives. However, that doesn't mean to say that there aren't certain elements of what happened to me that need to be looked at.

For example, the institutional racism of the police, their approach to people that seemingly, quote unquote, come across or present themselves as having mental health issues. This area things needs to be looked at. In addition to people that are abusing the system for their own personal needs that are not orientated around helping someone get better.

In fact, some people know that certain people that they have played a part in sectioning shouldn't be in a psychiatric ward. So then the wider picture, again, is so many different people get affected with this. The NHS is already overrun, we know this, you can tell from waiting times. Staff are fatigued. And then on top of this, their work is being made harder by other people that are taking, I want to say taking the law into their hands but it's not that, it's not even, it's not anything to do with the law. It's almost like they're, they're playing that sort of position of God with people's lives. And you don't, you don't have the right to do that. That is unjust.

So that, in short, is what I've been thinking about in regards to insight and the fact that it can actually be dangerous. Because I feel like our last conversation was focused quite a lot on the benefits of insight. I mean if we put sectioning and whatever to one side, insight should be a great thing should it not? Acquiring knowledge to understand yourself and the wider world better. But sometimes some people can use that information against you.

And I can understand why some people feel so uncomfortable. We're talking about their own journeys. It just seems like you're always going to get penalised on some level, shape or form for it. But I don't care. I can't be penalised anymore than what I have done. I don't think anyone could do anything worse to me than what's already occurred. And because I'm able to sit in my truth, firmly, in terms of what happened, I just want to help others. That's all. I just want to help others find their voice so they can speak on their story.

Eve

There's a lot there!

Ninette

I know I literally went steamroller ahead! [laughs] Sorry I had to get it out!

Eve

Please do! That's what this this is all about. That is the space that I want to make for all of us to have these conversations. And to really dig into these definitions, these interpretations, assumptions made.

I've been listening back to our conversation, writing, thinking, reflecting and there's a real tension for me in what you've shared and what other people have shared around the difference between a clinical interpretation of insight and an individual, subjective, lived experience, embodied experience, of insight. And how these two don't speak to each other, or very rarely seem to, speak to each other. Or they speak to each other in quite unique, context-driven ways that can result in people feeling unheard.

You know, this strong sense of the work that I've done so far is people have felt unheard and unseen and misunderstood. And I think what feels very interesting from my perspective listening to you is you've found yourself walking back into the hospital in which you were detained against your will for a whole week to do work with people as a peer...

Ninette

It's not actually, the hospital that I do my peer support work in isn't the same hospital.

Eve

Ah it's not the same?

Ninette

No it's not. It's a hospital that's in South London whereas I'm born in East so...

Eve

Oh OK I'm so sorry.

Ninette

Yeah, no, no, no. No worries at all.

Eve

I got confused from...

Ninette

But nonetheless, I mean, we did touch upon it last time. The fact that even though I had no business going to the hospital apart from picking up little bits that I left, I made a point of going back there because I don't want to experience any more discomfort in relation to hospitals. Or even in relation to that incident. Because my only discomfort in being in a hospital, apart from the waiting times which can't be helped, is like feeling like, oh, this is [clicks fingers] I'm getting flashbacks of what happened before. I don't want to be here. And that would negatively impact me, for example, if I needed to go to the hospital because I had an emergency. Had I not taken those steps to force myself to go back, then I wouldn't go to a hospital again.

It's like on a par with what I was saying about the police. Like, I mean if I have to talk to them to, you know, invest in some greater good for other people that have gone through similar experiences yes of course I'll do that. But just casually talking to the police, general conversation, very pointless.

I'm more than happy to invite and welcome conversations about things that are going wrong and things that we can work on together, as in the police and the community, because me myself I can't do everything by myself. That's impossible. We're just better together, in general. And as much as I don't really have the best or the sweetest of tastes in my mouth for the police, at some level this is an opening or more an opportunity to have these difficult conversations. And I'm more than willing to have that if a situation arises of that nature, of course. You know, meaningful conversation. Like how can we work together to improve on things? Because there's a big need for improvement.

Eve

Yeah just sort of cycling back, it's interesting where we were going with this, because I feel like you're in quite a challenging place. Having the experiences you've had, going back into the psychiatric system, but this time with a lanyard [Ninette laughs], with a name badge...

Ninette

Yeah, essentially.

Eve

... going in and talking to people about their experiences and supporting people as a peer. But you don't agree with the diagnosis that was on your record?

Ninette

The diagnosis doesn't make sense, though, does it? Just to clarify what the diagnosis was, "Non organic/Organic psychosis". So if anyone can shed light

on what that's supposed to mean, because it's a contradiction in itself. I mean, how can I agree with a contradiction? It doesn't make any sense. And the key reason why I can't agree with it is because they haven't taken into consideration insight that makes me, or the context that makes Ninette as an individual.

For example, because, the three years of, you know, beating myself up about it, trying to figure out, what can I do to be better, I started to look internally. So I started, literally, I feel like it was on a daily basis, there wouldn't be a day that went by since following the incident where I wasn't thinking about how could, how could I have prevented this? What could I have done better? Like, is there actually something wrong with me?

And then, when I peeled back all of the layers of what happened to the internal, which is just me as an individual, at the end of the day I feel that at the time of the incident I was super low on iron. Now, why that's critical for me is because I've found out only probably about two years ago, I knew I was anaemic from a long time, I just didn't know the extent to which that was. And it's only now the doctors are able to let me know. There was no talk of, "Oh this, what you're experiencing right now is linked to your iron deficiency". Of course not. I had to do that legwork myself.

So it's come to fruition that I've actually got sickle cell anaemia trait. So if I don't take my iron meds on a daily basis, then that could transpire into something that looks like a mental health, and you know what to a certain degree, is a mental health difficulty. Because if I don't take my iron I just feel really sluggish, really low in energy. And sometimes, I can't get out of bed. And on those occasions where I thought, "Oh, it's just me being lazy, or maybe I'm tired". And I'll force myself to, you know, go out into the world, do work, voluntary work. Yeah, but without iron meds, this literally has, it creates an imbalance within, some sort of imbalance within me. So that's key to everything.

But did the doctors, while I was in the psychiatric ward, tell me this? No. I had to look inside. I literally had to. It was like a trial and error, swiping off things that it possibly could be. But I did that. That's what I would have expected the doctors to be doing. Since they've got like, five to seven years of knowledge in that area. But then again, they don't have the insight on me. I have that, isn't it?

And it's down to me, I guess, for me to understand myself more. Then be able to express outwardly to others about myself. But in the thick of the situation, I'm sorry, I didn't have their medical knowledge. It took me three years to get there [laughs]. Which is, actually, to a certain degree, it is really comical. But then, I think if anything, what it really drums home is the importance of knowing oneself. It's crucial.

Eve

Yeah, I'm trying to visualise as you're talking about this experience in the hospital, trying to imagine what the conversations must have been like that you are having with the professionals involved in your care. Because they've got a story, they've got a name they're calling what's happening to you, that is written in black and white on paper. You then, at that point, you can't really challenge that in, in a position of being an inpatient. I mean, perhaps you can, but...

Ninette

I mean...

Eve

How would that work?

Ninette

Exactly! And that's actually, that's an interesting question. Because I felt that while I was there, for me to challenge anything that they were bringing to the table would have meant I'm extending my stay.

And I genuinely think that, that's the perspective amongst people on the wards. Having spoke to so many people on the ward I can broadly say that. Because I've been told, or been, the phrase that I think is most poignant, I remember someone saying to me is that, "I'm just playing the game". Which is, essentially, doing what the clinician or the doctor wants to see, sorry I'm getting excited, or, you know, behaving in a certain way, which is out of your character, but you know it's what they want to see. And it means, in turn, you're going to get released earlier, you know?

It's, something doesn't seem right there, you know? Playing the game. Because in some ways the psychiatric system, to a degree, because there's a lot of hard working people that are there for the right reasons, however there are some people that are coming with their discrimination, their own personal views on people and incorporating that into the work so then people are ending up maltreated.

So, to avoid the maltreatment people have started doing things that are out of character because they know the system, they know how it works. And if you're a little bit too assertive, or a little bit too bold, that may be seen as, "Oh, this seems like an episode, let's up the meds and extend the stay". You're already there against your own free will, why would you, why would you even show your true self if it means you're going to be penalised for it?

Because in some, in my case, I can't talk for anyone else, is that I feel like I was penalised for being me. You know? That in short, if I'm really to dial it

down to the basics, forget the fancy vocab, I was penalised for being Ninette. Which is unjust.

But there are many, sort of like, micro aggressions and other things that happen that are not that extreme, but on a similar sort of like, essence, that happens to me on a day-to-day basis. So I guess to a certain degree it's kind of like the norm quote unquote. But it shouldn't be. That much I do know.

Which is why one just needs to talk. Liberate themselves from the situation. Because once you start talking, I genuinely believe that without even thinking or feeling it sometimes, you're working towards the solution. Once you get it out of your head and stop it bubbling around, be it through talking or through journaling. I've had it help me. It's helped me to understand myself. And the situation that happened a bit better. So. But everyone's way is different, you know? And everyone's way takes time. Got to figure out what works for you. Talking definitely helps me.

Eve

Did [pauses] did you play the game?

Ninette

No! [laughs]. I didn't play the game. The first time around I was only there for a week. But I already, I became aware of the fact that I could appeal what was going on towards me. And when it comes to English, be it spoken or written, those are my subjects. I've always loved the English language. I've loved words. I've loved expression. So putting together an appeal even being in a very traumatised state, it wasn't that difficult for me. And yeah, in short I didn't play the game because, I mean, if I was playing the game I wouldn't have been sectioned in the first place would I?

Eve

How did you make it out of hospital? Through the appeal, was it?

Ninette

It was through the appeal. I think their intention was, if I had not written the appeal, then I would have been there for a month. Having written the appeal, I even forget what was in there, I wish I brought that paperwork now. But I never made, yeah, making strong parts in disputes is one of my strong points. And I think, from what I can recall, because that is the truth of the situation, I just gave an account of what it was that occurred. And that it was totally unjust. And it didn't take them long to grant me release. You know?

I think, going back to that question of playing the game, let's not forget there was the second time where I voluntarily put myself into a psychiatric ward. Because at that time I was convinced that all of these things that were written about me on Rio, the NHS system, all of the things that, all of the ways I was

being treated negatively was all on account of there been something wrong with me.

So that's what led to me just walking myself in the second time. And I stayed for the month. I didn't even bother appealing. Because I was defeated, at that point. Properly defeated. I really can't walk you through step-by-step what led to, after the second admission, me coming to that realisation that this isn't actually my fault. And to a certain degree, I've been brainwashed by what other people think of me rather than what is the reality, you know? [laughs] I have to laugh at it because it's just like, it's so, that's idiotic. It's idiotic for me to have believed other people and whatever it was that they thought of me, rather than what I know. But all of that was dismantled through something that shouldn't have happened in the first place.

However, as you know, this may sound like utter madness to people. But I think that I needed to peel back all of the layers, everything that was being said about me, even all of the stuff that I thought I knew about myself to just nothingness. And that was what my second admission to a psychiatric ward was about. That was what that process was. Me just peeling back all of these layers and trying to make sense of it essentially by myself. Because I couldn't have this conversation that I'm having with you now with a clinician or a psychiatrist. No way.

So going back to the question of playing the game, I guess, yes to a certain degree. Because if you are on a psychiatric ward and you are thinking outside of the box is what I would call it, different to other people, that can be interpreted as, "This is a condition, this is a mental health condition, we need to slap a name on it, slap some meds on the person and hope for the best".

Some people are just different. I like to call it, my manager at work her, she always references this whenever we talk, I'm just like, everyone should be comfortable in being in their own lane of weirdness. What is wrong with that? Like, why are our differences not celebrated? It's the differences in us that make the world such a beautiful, colourful place, as fromage-y as it may sound it's true. I feel like it's the differences that make the world what it is. So it should be celebrated.

And in no way should people be penalised for showing their true selves. I mean my true self may be a little bit off the wall to you. But that doesn't mean that it's erring on the side of a mental health episode. It could just be you just don't understand where I'm coming from. Doesn't necessarily mean that I pose a threat to myself or the wider world. Which there was no record of on my notes, of course.

Eve

So many questions...

Ninette

Yeah, I know! I know. I've got that, basically, I can't stick to one point. Once I started going it's just bom bom bom bom!

Eve

No no no, you don't need to. I think, umm, what am I feeling? [pauses] I'm feeling a lot of different things. I've got all of these kind of layers stacking up. And I'm trying to, like you've described, this process of peeling back, I'm trying to do the same with you now, peeling back. And there's things that I want to ask, but I'm also like, is that the right thing to do? Because I don't want to take you back to a time that you don't want to go back to. And that just feels awful....

Ninette

Oh don't feel like Eve. If anything I go back to that sort of, that incident, every time I go to work. But I just, because my perspective isn't one of, you know I remember that time, it's more like, I've managed to get through it. And this is what enables me to get up and go to that place. So I don't see as revisiting, or it being traumatic revisiting, so please feel free to ask whatever.

Eve

I think the last time, this image in my mind that you described, and that's really stayed with me since, is you coming out of the hospital, coming back to your place...

Ninette

To the scene of the crime, essentially.

Eve

Yeah, and just shutting the windows, closing up the windows, blind down, blanket down. And that image of you, in that total isolation, and all the things you must have been going through, the questioning, you know, how could this happen? What was going on? Did I do something wrong? Am I crazy? Am I not OK? Is this sense that I'm getting, that you're questioning yourself. You're starting to doubt your reality throughout that process. And then there came a point when you felt, like a turning point, where you felt I'm not OK, actually. Like it's reached a threshold now, I don't feel OK. And then you went voluntarily to a psychiatric hospital. And then you were there for that month. Could you tell me about that shift for you? What was going on in that process? And what it was like to go in, voluntarily, to try and get some support with how you were feeling?

Ninette

I wasn't getting any support outside of the hospital. And I thought, you know, literally, I'm not talking to anyone about how I feel. All I've got is myself, these four walls and a lot of darkness. And seeing as these are the people that supposedly are the ones to help in these situations, and being stigmatised with what happened to me, just thought, let me just go back there. Maybe this is the place for me, after all? Maybe there isn't any sort of, like prospects for me and my life? Imagine that, me thinking that about myself. Because I know myself now, and it's just like, I think that would have to be one of the lowest parts of my life to allow what other people were saying, or their thoughts on a situation that they weren't even present for, to overrun what I know is the truth. But I wasn't even confident in my own truth.

So I was just like, you know what, maybe they're right. Maybe I have got a problem. But to this day, like in terms of diagnosis, the second time around, there wasn't one as such. Do you know? Like they did not give me an update on the diagnosis. I think they just continued rolling with the other one, which was "Non organic/Organic Psychosis" which, anyway. But yeah, as a result of me feeling so isolated and alone I convinced myself that there was something wrong with me. That's how powerful the brain can be.

And that's how powerful a negative incident can impact, well, how it impacted me. Shouldn't start speaking so generally. Yeah. I honestly thought there was something wrong with me. And the only thing that was wrong was that I was severely low on my iron. That was it. And for the process that I went through the first time and then the second time, it just doesn't quantify the issue that was at hand. It doesn't tally up. So again, it again speaks to there being an issue. There's an issue in terms of how diagnoses are made.

From my experience, that's what I can fathom from what's happened. There's an issue with aftercare. Because, all right, so I did appeal the first time around in terms of what happened, but if the diagnosis was true to life why was no contact made to me from clinicians, from the people on the ward that were quote unquote supporting? Nobody got in contact with me. No one was there. I literally had no one. So when you put all of those things that I'm saying that happened as a result of the first time together into a ball, and then put it inside someone in terms of emotions it seemed logical at that point for me to go and readmit myself, you know? Because what else was there to do? Just carry on sitting in the dark and continue being depressed? Because that's what it was at that point.

Before the second admission I was definitely depressed. 100%. And that was a result of something that never should have occurred in the first place. That's why it's important for me to focus on the good that's come from the situation rather than the bad. Because there's so much negative and bad stuff that could easily tilt the scales, but I'm choosing, actively choosing, to take away positive from it. Nothing thrives off negativity. It's positivity that

wins every time. But it's easier said than done. I'm not going to say that there weren't days where I was just like, "OK I'm finished. I'm done here. I'm just not going to do anything for the next foreseeable future. I'm just going to sit here. Just going to sit here in this."

And you know, nothing lasts forever. It's sunny right now, you know, God permitting we hope it stays that way. But we know it's not going to, it's probably going to rain I can see the clouds. What you gonna do? Nothing lasts forever. I think that was the predominant thought after the second admission, this can't last forever.

I remember going downstairs to my brother after that admission. I was just like, "I don't know what on earth is going on with me here. But it can't last forever. And I just hope that it just does its thing [clicks fingers]. And then it's out as quick as it came in". And my brother just looked at me like, "What on earth you're talking about, like what is going on here?"

Because I wasn't even able, me and my brother are super close, I wasn't able to even speak to him about these things. I was just constantly in my own head, just beating myself up about it. And then having other people beat me up, well not physically, but verbally about it, you know? And after a while I just accepted defeat and walked myself in.

