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IN OTHER WORDS

'It was the youth of Dr. Howell': extract from *Faces in the Water*, by Janet Frame

Selected by Femi Oyeboade

Janet Frame (1924–2004) was born in Dunedin, New Zealand. Reportedly, only the award of a literary prize for a collection of short stories saved her from leucotomy and prompted her release from an 8-year confinement in a psychiatric hospital. Frame drew on her experiences in mental institutions in the novel *Faces in the Water*, which set in New Zealand between the First and Second World Wars. This extract is from *Faces in the Water*, The Women's Press, 1980: pp. 29–30.

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It was the youth of Dr. Howell which appealed to us; the other doctors who did not look after us but who were in charge of the hospital were gray-haired and elderly and hurried in and out of their offices down in front of the building like rats in and out of their hiding places; and they sat, in their work, with the same old chewed solutions littered about them, like nesting material. It was Dr. Howell who tried to spread the interesting news that mental patients were people and therefore might like occasionally to engage in the activities of people. Thus were born "The Evenings" when we played cards – snap, old maid, donkey and euchre; and ludo and snakes and ladders, with prizes awarded and supper afterwards. But where was the extra staff to supervise the activities? Pavlova, the one Social Worker for the entire hospital, valiantly attended a few "social" evenings held for men and women patients in the Ward Four dayroom. She watched people mount ladders and slide down chutes and travel home on the red and blue squares of parcheesi. She too was pleased when the climax of the evening came with the arrival of Dr. Howell in sport coat and soft shoes, with his corn-colored hair slicked down and his undoctory laugh sounding loud and full. He was like a god; he joined in the games and threw the dice with

the aplomb of a god hurling a thunderbolt; he put in the appropriate expression of dismay when he was ordered to slide down a chute, but you could see that he was a charmer even of bile-green cardboard snakes. And of people. He was Pavlova's god too, we knew that; but no amount of leaping about in her soiled white coat with the few bottom buttons undone could help her to steal Dr. Howell from the occupational therapist. Poor Pavlova! And Poor Noeline, who was waiting for Dr. Howell to propose to her although the only words he had even spoken to her were How are you? Do you know where you are? Do you know why you are here? – phrases which ordinarily would be hard to interpret as evidence of affection. But when you are sick you find yourself in a new field of perception where you make a harvest of interpretations which then provides you with your daily bread, your only food. So that when Dr. Howell finally married the occupational therapist, Noeline was taken to the disturbed ward. She could not understand why the doctor did not need her more than anyone else in the world, why he had betrayed her to marry someone whose only virtue seemed to be the ability to show patients who were not always interested, how to weave scarves and make shadow stitch on muslin.