

**THE HOSPITAL ALWAYS WINS**  
**Aired on NPR's *STATE OF THE RE:UNION***  
**Produced by Laura Starecheski**  
**Air Date: October 1, 2013**  
**Total Running Time: 53:06**

AL LETSON: From WJCT in Jacksonville Florida, I'm Al Letson and you're listening to State of the Re:Union. Today we're doing something a little bit different. We are taking the entire hour to tell you just one story.

It unfolds somewhere that exists in every major American city... but most of us have ever seen the inside of it. It's a place that we usually think of as dark, and depressing, but what we found was a story full of romance, art, dramatic schemes, comedy... and it hits on some the deepest things we struggle with as human beings: redemption and forgiveness.

We're gonna tell you an unbelievable story that SOTRU producer Laura Starecheski has had in the works for almost a decade. So sit back, and put your seatbelt on.

We'll dive right in, after the news.

*[MUSIC BREAK]*

AL LETSON: I'm Al Letson and you're listening to State of the Re:Union, from NPR and PRX. For most of our episodes, we travel the country, telling stories of one place in America at a time. We try to go deep into that place, to tell you what it's like to actually be there.

This hour, we have something a little different for you. We're devoting our whole show to one story.

It comes to us from SOTRU producer Laura Starecheski.

This story starts about ten years ago, when Laura visited a mental hospital on the outskirts of Queens, New York, called Creedmoor. And on the grounds of that hospital, she stumbled on to a mystery that she just couldn't let go of.

So Creedmoor... it's a mental institution... what does it look like there? 'cause in my mind, the first the I think about is rubber rooms, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest...?

LAURA: Yeah, it is kinda like that. It's a big state institution. At one point, back in the 1950s, there were more than 6,000 inpatients there. But by 2004, when I went, there were only a couple hundred left. So basically it was like a ghost town.

AL: So, what were you doing out there?

LAURA: I didn't really know, back then. I was just curious about what went on in a place like Creedmoor. I never could have predicted I'd get sucked into this story the way I did.

AL: Wow, ok, so just start at the beginning.

LAURA: Ok, so I go out there—

AMBI: footsteps and door slam

LAURA: —and just start interviewing patients at this arts program.

AMBI: Door slam

LAURA [TAPE] Great. So... this is Laura Starecheski at the Living Museum. It's March 7... [FADE UNDER]

L: It's called the Living Museum. It's inside one of those old crumbling buildings. It's a chaotic place, two stories, lots of rooms, filled with decades' worth of Creedmoor patients' art work.

LAURA [TAPE]: And what kind of art work have you done... ?

I would record anyone who wanted to talk to me.

DAVID W: I've done a lot of drawings, black and white abstract drawings... [FADE UNDER]

Most of the people I talked to were hard for me to connect with. They were distant. Or they seemed really broken down.

But then, I walked into this one room. On the wall there was this huge oil painting. Very detailed. Very realistic. It was a parody of The Last Supper.

ISSA: That's Jesus eating chicken and watermelon...

Along with Bob Marley, Albert Einstein, Richard Nixon, clutching a couple of reel to reel tapes...

ISSA: That's a very old Watergate joke that maybe some people wouldn't get.

The artist was a patient named Issa Ibrahim. Issa didn't look like the other Creedmoor patients. He acted and dressed more like a downtown artist: Converse sneakers, tight, black, peg-leg jeans, a cool t-shirt.

ISSA: (chuckles)

Issa showed me another one of his paintings—the room was full of them—called The First Kiss.

L [TAPE]: Oh, wow.

ISSA: That's for someone special in my life...

He told me he had a girlfriend, Susan—a former patient he'd met in the hospital. They'd been together—on and off—for about ten years.

ISSA: Every Sunday we spend together for like three or four hours, and we talk, and we listen to music. I just introduced her to the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, and she likes them.

I stayed for a while talking to Issa that day. The next time I came back, I went looking for him.

L: Hey, just wanted to see how you were doing, what have the last couple weeks been...

ISSA: Doing great, doing great...

And the more we talked, the more sane he seemed. We read the same magazines. We talked about art. We recommended music to each other, and books:

ISSA: I just got finished reading the funniest book I read in years. David Sedaris, *Me Talk Pretty One Day*. Hilarious book. Hilarious. You gotta read it.

I couldn't make sense of the situation. Issa didn't seem sick to me. And if he wasn't sick, why was he still at Creedmoor? I kept going back...

Eventually I asked Issa why he was in the hospital.

L [TAPE]: Would you feel comfortable telling me that story of how you came here?

ISSA: Uh, off-mic maybe. It's a tough thing... 'cause it's weird, um...

All I knew was that he had no contact with his family. He'd just turned 40, and he'd been at Creedmoor for more than a decade.

He would always tell his girlfriend Susan to move on, to go live her life.

Because even though he dreamed of being an artist out in the city, building a life with Susan—the truth was he had no idea when he would actually get out of the hospital. If he would ever get out of the hospital.

ISSA: It's scary, because, this is your life in their hands, you know. You don't want somebody to kind of wait for you. Which is what it is, indefinite waiting. And that's hell.

As time went by, I saw that my life was moving forward. And Issa's was stuck on the same 24-hour cycle that it had been for years and years: the art program during the day, the ward at night. I still couldn't understand why Creedmoor wouldn't let him out.

Then one day, Issa gave me a copy of a cd—his cd.

SONG: *Little did we know you then / Trophy for the older men / Tall and lean, like a gazelle / The boys would howl / You never kiss and tell...*

I Can't Go On, I Must Go On: original songs by Issa Ibrahim. He'd somehow recorded an entire album in his room on the ward.

And that's when I finally started to understand Issa's situation. Maybe he was still stuck at Creedmoor... because he was his own worst enemy.

SIEGEL: He wrote a song using the first name of the female director of the hospital. I think it was called 'Hot for Charlotte.'

That's Dr. Larry Siegel, a psychiatrist. He's assessed Issa a bunch of times over the years. 'Hot for Charlotte' was about Charlotte Seltzer, the boss of the whole hospital.

SIEGEL: I guess in a way it's like writing a song if you're in junior high school about the principal.

SONG: *There's something you forgot / You're hot for Charlotte...*

GEO [PHONE]: Well just the title is enough to get you in trouble.

That's Issa's buddy Geo.

ISSA [PHONE]: Yeah, but...C'mon!

Geo is an obsessive documentarian. And he took the liberty of recording their phone conversations, when Issa used to call Geo from the crackly payphone on the ward.

ISSA [PHONE]: There's something you forgot, you're hot for Charlotte.

GEO [PHONE]: But why did you name it that, Hot for Charlotte?

ISSA [PHONE]: Because that was the title of the song. (laughter) That's how it plays out...

SONG: *I wanna meet her, I wanna be her... won't you take me to your leader? Aaaaaahhhhhh...*

Issa had seen Charlotte Seltzer around the hospital plenty of times. She was one of his captors. And apparently, he wanted to make sure that she knew who *he* was, too. He dropped the cd in the inter-hospital mail, and he sent it right to her.

MUSIC: *... you're hot for Charlotte. She may leave you there to Rot... ooh, but you're hot for Charlotte.*

ISSA: She may leave you there to rot. (laughs). You start censoring yourself, that's certain death. Maybe I shouldn't have written it. Or maybe I should have written it, but I shouldn't have recorded it. But then when you record it, you want people to hear it. So I recorded it. I wanted people to hear it. And I guess I wanted her to hear it, for some unknown reason.

DR. SEIGEL: That was thought to be an indication of some grave problems with his judgment and his thinking and hostility.

And when Charlotte Seltzer heard that cd, it meant one more bad note in Issa's chart. One more example of his problems with authority. And one more reason to keep him in the hospital...

BEAT / PAUSE

I knew Issa for six years before I found out the reason he was first sent to Creedmoor.

MUSIC UP

His story starts when he was two years old. When his destiny in life was first revealed: he was meant to become a great artist.

Issa grew up in a big family—he had two brothers and two sisters. They lived in a house way out in Queens.

ISSA: I came from a very bohemian, artsy, jazzy, beatnik, hippie household. So the house was full of artists, musicians, writers, the intelligensia.

Issa's Dad, Jamil Ibrahim, was a jazz musician, a bass player who ran with the greats of the 50s and 60s.

His mom, Audrey, was a model, and a painter.

The Ibrahim house was sort of a creative utopia, but it wasn't always peaceful. His parents fought sometimes, there were parties late into the night.

I talked to two of Issa's siblings: his sister Karen, and his older brother, Ishak.

ISHAK: There was always a full house. Always a full house. Just so many things going on... drinking, smoking and everything else.

Issa was born in 1965. His name means Jesus in Arabic.

ISHAK: Well, he was the baby of the bunch. I think he was one of mom's favorites.

KAREN: All the good looks, all the talent, all the brains, all the everything—Issa had it.

All Issa did was draw, draw, draw. Issa would be sitting down eating dinner, he drawing.

ISHAK: He knew that's what he wanted to do. That was his thing.

Issa's earliest memories are of painting with his mom.

ISSA: I remember being two and three and four years old and her sitting me down at her feet while she's painting this gigantic painting of Mao Zedong with a purple head, or a red Fidel Castro. She did these iconic leaders. She did a gigantic Idi Amin.

And she'd whisper to me, while I'm drawing, doing my little doodles by her feet, You're gonna be great, Iss. You're gonna be the greatest ever.

Issa's whole family was banking on his talent. They were sure he'd be a famous artist one day.

But then when Issa was 22, his dad collapsed on stage. Within a year, he was dead of cancer. And Issa started smoking a ton of weed to cope with the grief.

Ishak had left home to serve in the Air Force by this point, but when he came home on leave, Issa seemed different.

ISHAK: We started to think there was something wrong with him because, ok, well, he was always in his room. He'd creep out from time to time. That was basically his sanctuary.

Soon, Issa was afraid to eat certain foods. He said there was a plot to poison him. He didn't trust anyone. When family came by to visit, Issa shouted at them to leave.

ISHAK: People stopped coming by the house, for fear. Out of fear. Because they didn't know what was going on.

Issa had holed himself up in his bedroom upstairs—the only one of the kids left living at home.

ISHAK: That Christmas, I get the Christmas card.

Ishak was serving in Korea that winter when he got a letter from his mom.

AMBI: Paper... shuffling.

ISHAK: Christmas of 89.

Dear Son Ishak. Peace and blessings unto you. Things here are very bad. No Christmas this year. Please son pray for us. Please write me immediately no matter what. Love...

Ishak wasn't sure what the letter was about. But it worried him. And he was all the way across the world. He couldn't get home to figure out what was going on.

And Issa himself knew something was wrong... Back in Queens, he felt like everyone had turned against him. He tried talking to his mom, but he didn't really have the words to explain what was happening.

ISSA: I said, Ma, I think I'm losing my mind.

She said, Please don't let it be mental. Don't say it's mental. Let me rub some healing oil on your head.

So she laid me right down on the couch, put my head in her lap, and rubbed the healing oil in my head.

But the healing oil didn't help. And Issa just felt stranger and stranger...

MUSIC UP

AL LETSON: That's producer Laura Starecheski. We'll pick up Issa's story in a minute, on State of the Re:Union.

*[MUSIC BREAK]*

AL LETSON: I'm Al Letson and this is State of the Re:Union. We're telling the story of an artist named Issa Ibrahim. Our producer Laura Starecheski met Issa at a mental hospital called Creedmoor, where he'd been stuck for more than ten years. The reason he'd been sent to Creedmoor goes back to the winter of 1990, in Queens, New York. Where Issa was slowly losing his mind.

This is where the story gets a bit graphic, so if you're listening with kids, you might not want them to hear this next part.

Here's Laura:

LAURA: One night, in February 1990, Issa was getting on the subway. And he looked around at all the other people on the platform to find that they were all looking back at him.

ISSA: Everyone I felt was looking at me, as if to say: Let's talk. Let's talk. Communicate, it's happening tonight.

Issa was terrified. He rode the train for hours. When he finally got back Queens, around 1 o'clock in the morning, the only one home was his mom.

ISSA: And I heard voices for the first time. It was almost like having a radio on, and someone whizzing the dial. That's exactly what it felt like, exactly what it sounded like in my head. But the things they were saying was about me: 'You're gonna die in 2 days. They found a cure for AIDS and you can have sex all you want! So-and-so's the anti-Christ, and you've gotta kill 'em.'

Issa heard a voice tell him he was Jesus. He turned on the TV...

AMBI: television turns on

... And started flipping the channels. He saw messages... from NASA, from Magic Johnson... about mass killings and the second coming. The people on the TV were talking directly to him, and he was talking back.

ISSA: My mom said, Sounds like you're having a party up there, Iss!

I said, People are talking to me.

Really?

Yeah.

I said, Mom, am I Jesus?

And she paused for a moment, and this is what will confound me perhaps for the rest of my life. She said, Yes. (Clears throat.)

And I thought I saw in her face something evil...

And I'm looking at her. And I see her face shifting, as if a paved road in the summertime. I'm seeing what I believe to be evil underneath my mother's face.

And then, Issa says, he attacked her.

ISSA: She's screaming, and she's wrestling with me, with tremendous strength because she's fighting for her life.

Issa has to exorcise the evil, the demon inside his mother. It's the only way to save her. She keeps trying to get away, but she can't. Issa's too strong. This struggle, in the upstairs bedroom of Issa's childhood home, goes on for at least an hour.

ISSA: And she's still moving, I'm getting tired. And I didn't know what to do. And she's still possessed. So I thought, Let me just hold her down for a moment, and think for a moment. So I put my knee on her chest. And, uh, I just put my knee on her chest, but it collapsed—it collapsed—and it broke her sternum and her rib cage.

All I could hear were her ribs cracking. That's a sound I'll never forget. I just knew, right then: I fucked up.

After hearing her ribs crack, I couldn't believe what I did. (clears throat)

I stood above her, her body was pulsing, and a little bit of dark red blood came to her mouth and her eyes closed. Within a couple of seconds, she stopped moving, she stopped pulsing and she was gone.

FADE TO SILENCE

ISHAK: Mom's dead and Issa killed her. I says...

Here's Issa's brother, Ishak.

ISHAK: I was... hm... what's the word I could use. I just couldn't understand it. You know. And it was beyond anger and sadness. It was just somewhere else totally.

No one in Issa's family could make sense of what had happened.

When Issa was arrested, the police took one look at him and saw that he needed anti-psychotic medication... to them, it was obvious that he was completely out of his mind.

By the time he ended up in front of a judge, everyone in that courtroom had already taken sides.

ISSA: I'm looking around, and I look in the back of the courtroom and I see my nephew, my older brother, and one of my mother's oldest friends. And they all had such hatred in their eyes. Such hatred in their eyes.

Issa's family was desperate to see him pay for what he'd done. His brother even considered taking revenge, and killing Issa himself.

But on the other side of the courtroom was a psychiatrist who had examined Issa and said, No, he was psychotic when he killed his mother. He's not responsible for what he did. He should take a plea—not guilty by reason of insanity. And go to a hospital for treatment, instead of a prison for punishment.

Usually, when we think of the insanity defense, we think of someone who committed a crime trying to get away with it.

But... the funny thing is that Issa did not come down on the side that you'd expect... Like his family, he thought he deserved to be punished. He'd be ashamed to go to the hospital after what he'd done.

ISSA: I felt I was guilty. In my mind, I knew that I was responsible.

My lawyer pled not guilty. I wanted to say something and he was like: sh-sh-sh.

So in that moment, Issa didn't stand up and make a speech about his guilt.

And instead of taking the offer from the DA, 5-15 years in prison, he went with his lawyer's advice... and he chose the hospital. Where there would be no sentence. And no release date.

SIEGEL: Rather than getting a free ride or getting off, actually, it's difficult in some ways. It can be more difficult than going to prison.

That's Dr. Larry Siegel again, the forensic psychiatrist.

SIEGEL: You subject yourself to indefinite confinement. Some people just can't get better, and they've been in for years and years.

Getting better would mean that the hospital would have to be *sure* Issa wasn't sick anymore—he'd gotten a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia—and they'd have to be sure that he wouldn't hurt anyone again.

That can take decades. Some patients like Issa die in the hospital.

When Issa got to Creedmoor, he started at what's called 'Level 1.' No privileges.

SIEGEL: Initially he was on a locked ward. Most of the wards at Creedmoor are locked.

Issa was put on a ward with 30 or 40 other patients. They were all herded into a day room at 6:30am. The radio and tv were always on at the same time. Hip-hop top 40, Jerry Springer and The Price Is Right, on an endless loop.

Issa felt saner than he had in years. Because he was finally on medication... no more paranoia, no voices, no delusions. And in a stroke of luck: no side effects.

Issa made it through the first week. And then on the weekend, he was introduced to a Saturday morning ritual. The doctors and social workers weren't around, and the therapy aides were in charge. They'd sit behind a desk and call out the patients one by one:

ISSA: 'Klein, get over here!' And Klein would come over. 'Remember on Tuesday when you took those two puddings? Remember that? Into the bathroom!'

And you'd hear them go into the bathroom (smack smack smack smack smack)

And then they'd come out, shielding themselves. They wouldn't get hurt, but they'd be smacked around. And that's how they kept order.

Issa carefully watched who got punished, and for what.

ISSA: I would sit there, try to blend into the wall. Go grey. Because you just didn't know when your time would come up.

So during the day, Issa followed the rules, and steered clear of any kind of confrontation.

And soon he realized that at night, he could steal a few hours of total freedom. Starting at midnight. When the staff left the patients alone to sleep.

ISSA: They just did a count, and now they won't be back again til 6 in the morning. I've got 5 or 6 hours to do a painting. I'd work all night--

Because at night, he would never be interrupted, or watched. He could paint whatever he wanted. He felt that pull of destiny returning: he could still be an artist. The first thing Issa did was a self-portrait.

ISSA: Autopsy of the Damned. It's me on a gurney. On a autopsy gurney. With a scalpel and a pair of scissors by my head. And it's me laying there, with my

chest open. As if in an autopsy. And there are no ribcage, no heart, nothing inside at all. It's like a void. An emptiness.

I was deep in this void, trying to figure out: What's in there? Is there anything in there? Where's your heart? Where's your soul? What's in there? What are you made of? You know what you did—why'd you do it? Did you mean to do it? No, you didn't mean to do it, but I mean, like, how could this happen?

I didn't think anybody would see it. I just did it for myself.

Issa loved the way *Autopsy of the Damned* turned out. He hung it up on the wall of his room and kept painting.

He did a few dirty paintings, to amuse himself...

ISSA: This one, 'Oh My.' Another oil.

Then, twisted caricatures of his captors at Creedmoor.

ISSA: This is 'Chain of Command.'

He painted the deputy director of the hospital wearing a Nazi soldier's uniform, sucking on a lemon.

ISSA: (laughs)

He painted the clinical director as a monkey with a human face.

ISSA: That was a good painting, that was a good painting. And after a while, I had my whole room decorated with paintings.

He started doing so well that the hospital experimented with taking him off his medication. It was almost like he was living real life.

ISSA: So I tried to live the best way I could live, you know. If there was a painting opportunity. If there was a sexual opportunity, and I wasn't taking advantage of anybody... I wanted to have a relationship. Somebody to get to know me, and I could get to know somebody else.

In fact there were a few women that Issa got to know. There was Susan—the patient who would become his long-time girlfriend. Issa met *her* at Creedmoor's neglected library.

SUSAN: What I loved about Issa is that he was so respectful. He took me into like abandoned buildings and did nothing with me. All he wanted to do was hold my hand.

Issa and Susan starting painting together at the Living Museum. Issa had dreadlocks and Susan liked to wear a black cape. And before long they were known as the “it couple” on Creedmoor’s grounds.

SUSAN: We really stood out.

ISSA: Yeah.

SUSAN: Plus, we didn’t look mentally ill, that’s why we stood out. When you think about it.

ISSA: Well, I didn’t. I didn’t.

SUSAN: Hey wait a second!

ISSA: laughing

SUSAN: Remember, we used to say that all the time? Who’s sicker than who today? Who’s sicker than who?

ISSA AND SUSAN: laughing

Meanwhile, Issa had been assigned a social worker on his ward named Connie. She was in her 60s, and Issa was 27. She was Issa’s therapist. She advocated for him in court . She helped him line up gallery shows at Lincoln Center, and all around New York state, so he could start showing his art.

And as time went by, Issa says, their relationship became romantic too. And Connie started doing what Issa calls ‘her own type of social work.’

ISSA: ‘Cause she knew. She knew what institutionalization did to people, what it could do to me, or anybody. She didn’t want me to get stuck, become a part of the furniture.

So during the day, she’d tell Issa to just breeze by the guards at the front gates, and go wait around the corner from the hospital. And she’d pick him up in her car.

ISSA: She’d just take me on drives. She’d just take me on drives, you know.

They’d drive to the ocean, sit on the beach and talk. Once Connie drove him to a cemetery on Long Island to see his mother’s headstone.

ISSA: Totally against the rules. Totally messed up. Some people would look at it and say this woman’s out of her mind. But man, was it a beautiful thing.

Issa says they went off the grounds constantly. Until one day, they were seen driving away from Creedmoor in Connie's car.

ISSA: They saw us go off grounds; that was the end of the story.

Connie took an early retirement. And Issa got knocked back down to Level 1. No privileges. No more painting at the Living Museum. He had to stay inside, on the ward, all the time.

ISSA: That's what happens when you lose your levels, You have to start from scratch.

But Dr. Siegel says that Issa shouldn't have been penalized for what happened with Connie.

SIEGEL: He was a patient. When someone's in a hospital, you should look at the staff to behave appropriately. The end. Period. Final. Some of the evaluators from Creedmoor seemed to think that his behavior in the hospital was indicative of problems on his part, and wanted to blame him for what happened.

The hospital started an investigation. Issa was moved off of Connie's ward. And on to a ward called O-85. Whether Creedmoor was intentionally trying to punish him, or not, every patient in the hospital knew what O-85 meant.

ISSA: That's where they send people to die. That's where they send people to die. And that's where they put people who were problematic, who were drug cases, who were unrepentant, who ... it was like going to hell.

And it felt like it. It wasn't almost like the light was different. People there looked more desperate, dirtier...

LAURA: So what would people do to get off that ward? What did you do?

ISSA: You couldn't get off the ward! You went there to die. 'Cause none of them had family. We were all in the same boat. We were all in the same boat.

Amazingly, Issa was still unrepentant himself. He was involved with another woman, a nurse on 0-85.

And at this point, the battle between Issa and the hospital had become a full-fledged war.

SIEGEL: I think he caused problems at Creedmoor, and so Creedmoor caused him some problems.

One day, the unit chief knocked on Issa's door. He said he was there to confiscate Issa's paintings. When Issa asked him why, he said:

ISSA: Well, the administration wants to look at it for traces of pathology. He told me that.

The unit chief made Issa stand outside the room and he started taking down Issa's paintings. He walked out with canvases tucked under both arms. And then the walls were bare.

ISSA: I just sat in my room and I really felt lost. I felt like all is lost.

Issa had no privileges, so he was stuck on the ward. With Connie out of the picture, he had lost one of the few people he trusted. He'd been off his medication for months. Losing his paintings—that felt like losing that last part of himself. He couldn't take it.

ISSA: And I got paranoid; I didn't trust anybody anymore, because I couldn't trust them. And I didn't trust the food after a while. And I didn't trust anything. And then that just builds and builds and builds.

Issa started obsessively cleaning his room. Then he threw away all his clothes. He was put in a strait jacket and sent to a secure ward.

SCHANE: He was about as psychotic as you could get.

Dr. Murray Schane is a psychiatrist who was on Issa's treatment team. He saw Issa on the secure ward once when he was sick—it's kind of like an intensive care unit for patients who are out of control.

SCHANE: When I saw him, he was running around nude, very incoherent, and very preoccupied with delusional ideas about devils and violent horrible stuff.

Here's Dr. Siegel:

SIEGEL: He was walking counterclockwise. Smearing feces. Turning in circles.

Once the hospital put him back on his medication, though, Issa's delusions quieted. After about 30 days, he came back to the ward.

But emotionally, he was rattled. He didn't paint for years after that.

ISSA: Fearful . Fearful. Scared to death that they'd hurt me. Again.

And when he did start to paint again, it was different.

ISSA: Very puerile, empty, boring paintings. Benign, kind of. Portraits of the Beatles, portraits of people on the ward. Portraits of Chuck Berry. Things that wouldn't hurt anybody.

He started dressing different too—he got a hold of a catalog and ordered some Dockers pants, and button down shirts. He cut off his dreadlocks.

ISSA: Just... wearing suits and ties if I could get away with it. Just... I don't know... (trails off)

LAURA [TAPE]: What were you hoping they would see in you then?

ISSA: That I was dischargeable. Clean-cut kid. Repentant. Ready to move on.

Issa kept up that routine for three or four years. But playing the clean-cut kid didn't seem to help his case at all.

SIEGEL: Each time he went up for privileges, he kinda got knocked down.

Dr. Siegel says Issa could never make it to 'Level 4' privileges. That's the crucial last step before release. When patients get to try going out into the city without a staff escort, to take a class, work a part-time job. To ease them into the outside world.

SIEGEL: Things tend to move at a slow pace. The problem with Issa was his movement was glacial in speed. It just wasn't going anywhere.

But something had shifted for Issa. Even if the hospital couldn't see it. Ten years had passed. He had started to forgive himself for his mother's death. Maybe for the first time since he'd whispered to his defense lawyer in that courtroom: No, I am guilty. I feel like I am guilty.

Issa started to believe that he deserved a chance at life on the outside. He was ready.

PAUSE

ISSA: Just when I kinda realize: Okay, I've come through the other end, and I've suffered enough.... And now there's no way out.

I'd done so much damage to my case, and myself. And that would have been the perfect punishment, if I wanted to punish myself. You know? (laughs) It was like I set up this perfect punishment, but I didn't want to be punished anymore.

MUSIC UP

AL LETSON: We'll continue Issa's story in a minute, on State of the Re:Union.

*[MUSIC BREAK]*

AL LETSON: I'm Al Letson, and you're listening to State of the Re:Union. We're telling the story of Issa Ibrahim, an artist with schizophrenia who killed his mother during a psychotic break, and took the insanity plea. Twelve years later he's still stuck in a mental hospital called Creedmoor. He's ready to rejoin the outside world. But his case at the hospital... is stuck.

Here's Laura:

LAURA: In order to have any hope of getting out, Issa needed the hospital administration to believe that he wasn't dangerous. That he understood his crime and wasn't likely to hurt anyone again.

In 2002, a new forensic director started working at the hospital, Dr. Angela Hegarty. She's a forensic psychiatrist, like Dr. Siegel. And her job at Creedmoor was to assess patients. She would how dangerous they were. How they might handle being released from the hospital. And then she would testify about her findings in court.

This was a potential turn-around for Issa. Because Dr. Hegarty was asked to do a brand new assessment of him. Starting from scratch.

AMBI: door knock

I went out to see Dr. Hegarty at her house in the suburbs...

HEGARTY: Hello?

LAURA: Hi. How are you?

She wouldn't speak specifically about Issa's case. But she did fill me in on how she does her job. She doesn't assess just anyone:

HEGARTY: I only take cases that interest me.

Her assessments usually begin with a meeting, face to face.

HEGARTY: And they're never what you expect. The guy that you think is really bad, turns out to be really not so bad after all, in fact some of them are wonderful. And then there's people who look wonderful, and they're terrible...

A lot of forensic psychiatrists do assessments that take just one or two meetings. But Dr. Hegarty doesn't work that way. She meets with a patient:

HEGARTY: Essentially, until I understand. Long as it takes.

As long as it takes to find out the truth, Dr. Hegarty says. She starts from the very beginning. Sometimes literally, with someone's birth records.

HEGARTY: And then there's the record in the hospital, there's the criminal records, there are the school records...

She sometimes visits the scene of a crime, even if years and years have passed.

HEGARTY: Climbing down onto all sorts of sub-basements...

She interviews family. Friends. Acquaintances. She has to gather as much information as possible, because, Dr. Hegarty says, pretty much every patient will try to only show her their good side. And hide all the bad.

HEGARTY: I mean look, let's be real. Regardless of whether or not you need to be there, everybody wants out, ok?

Dr. Hegarty began her assessment of Issa in 2002, right when she started working at Creedmoor. They met every week. Sometimes more than once a week. And after a month or two, Issa says Dr. Hegarty told him that she wanted to begin therapy, that they needed to go deeper.

ISSA: So we can 'peel the layers of the onion,' she said. 'It's like the layers of an onion. We need to peel back the layers and really get to the core of you.'

And I was fearful of being seen as recalcitrant. So I consented.

Issa and Dr. Hegarty were in therapy for about six months. She also went over all his records, his mom's autopsy report, the police reports. She interviewed his sister Karen, who hadn't spoken to him since their mother's death.

She wrote an extensive report. It's almost forty pages long.

AMBI: pages turning

ISSA [reading report]: "the patient meets FULL diagnosis criteria for narcissistic personality disorder... the symptoms of which overlap considerably with those of schizophrenia."

Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Another diagnosis.

ISSA: [reading] "His need for admiration and grandiosity and lack of empathy are core factors for this diagnosis. The patient expects to be recognized as superior to others. His need to be extraordinary extends beyond his art work to his relationships. He needs to be in the role of savoir, in charge of the relationships with women. He is preoccupied with fantasies of success that are at times grossly unrealistic..."

Dr. Hegarty also wrote that Issa was ‘predatory’, ‘sexually aggressive’ and ‘dangerous.’

ISSA: [flips pages] I was so distraught after reading this. I was shaken. I was wondering... am I a sexual predator? Am I this person that she sees and is clearly going to testify to ad nauseum? I really didn't know.

Dr. Siegel read the report too.

SIEGEL: You know, you read the report, he sounds kinda scary... deceitful, manipulative, that he tended to manipulate women, got involved in inappropriate relationships. And painted a picture that he was a dangerous individual who might do something to hurt anyone at any time.

Reading the report, even knowing Issa for years, I started to question what I knew about him. Had he somehow been manipulating me? What if I'd been wrong to trust him all this time?

When I interviewed Dr. Hegarty, I was desperate to ask her how she'd come to her conclusions.

L [TAPE]: I have your report, I've interviewed all these other people specifically about this case, and I know you don't want to comment on this case...

I tried one more time to find out.

HEGARTY: Here's the thing. Ethically, if it's hard for a subject to listen in court, what's it like for a subject to listen to a forensic psychiatrist talk about them on the radio? I'm not doing it. I'm sorry.

Dr. Hegarty's assessment went out to every court and state agency charged with evaluating Issa's case. From his perspective, the report basically locked the door on him, and threw away the key.

Issa's case was stalled. 2003, 2004, 2005... years were going by and nothing was happening. Patients are supposed to appear in court every two years, so their case can go up for review. Usually the patient wants to get out, and the hospital wants to keep them in.

SIEGEL: It's very difficult to prevail in those hearings if the hospital says the individual needs to stay, it can be difficult to convince a judge to let you go.

ISSA: It's true, the hospital always wins. The judge will always defer to the doctors in the hospital. They've known you for as long as you've been here, So when they're saying, Don't let this guy out, the judge is gonna say, Wow, ok. They'll listen. And they'll go along with it.

If he was ever gonna get out of the hospital, Issa had to sway the court back to his side. It hadn't worked to wear Dockers and button-down shirts. It hadn't worked to try to convince the hospital psychiatrists that he was sane.

ISSA: I said ok, Is that how you're gonna play it? I'm gonna get another doctor. And I hired another doctor. Which blew their mind.

It blew their mind because no one knew where Issa had gotten the money for the doctor. But he'd been selling his art from inside the hospital for years. And no matter how offensive or pathological Creedmoor found Issa's art to be, the outside world loved it.

ISSA: I've sold a lot of good pieces for a lot of good money over the years.

Issa had sold some paintings for a few hundred dollars. Some went for thousands.

ISSA: And I always saved my money. Didn't know for what.

He used his nest egg to hire Dr. Allen Reichman, an independent forensic psychiatrist, to do another assessment of him. Issa called his move "stacking the deck." Dr. Reichman warned him that he could be spending his life savings on a lock and key. Because he could do the assessment and still decide Issa wasn't ready to be released.

REICHMAN: If I have any reasonable doubt, then I have to say no. I don't care who it is that's hiring me. I can't give a dishonest opinion just to please them, and I will not.

Dr. Reichman did his assessment. And then the hospital wanted to do more evaluations, personality testing... there were years of delays.

Meanwhile, Issa put all his energy into preparing for court. He smuggled in a laptop, so he could do research on how to win a case like his. Then a cell phone, so he could keep in better contact with his lawyer. He started talking to Geo, his friend who used to call him on the payphone on the ward, for hours every night.

ISSA [PHONE]: Uh, this isn't jail. I'm not a criminal.

GEO [PHONE]: No, no--

ISSA: I just went hog wild. We'd have like 5 and 6 hour conversations.

GEO [PHONE]: I can imagine just going for a walk with you.

ISSA [PHONE]: Yeah, I'd love that.

GEO [PHONE]: Yeah!

ISSA [PHONE]: You know?

Court hearings finally began in 2008. The judge sifted through stacks of records and reports. There were hours and hours of testimony. Four doctors weighed in—including Dr. Hegarty, appearing on behalf of the hospital.

The testimony from Dr. Reichman was short. And completely favorable—in fact, he stated that Issa could have been ready for release from Creedmoor as early as 1997.

REICHMAN: [Reading from report] ‘It is presently my understanding that very little if anything has been done to prepare Mr. Ibrahim for discharge such as a significant increase in his privileges...’

And that was indeed the case. They take their sweet time.

Dr. Siegel also testified. He noted that it had been ten years since Issa’s last psychotic episode. That he was on monthly injections of Haldol, an anti-psychotic medication. And knew that he needed to be on it for the rest of his life.

SIEGEL: There were five or six or seven reports describing his behavior. The guy, he had done nothing—he hadn’t assaulted anyone, he had not refused an injection, hadn’t reported a voice, no one saw him talking to himself, he really hadn’t done anything that showed he needed to be in a hospital.

Dr. Janos Marton, Issa’s mentor at the arts program, testified on his behalf as well. He said Issa was ready to go.

And the presiding judge started to see a pattern. Judge William Erlbaum of the New York State Supreme Court.

JUDGE ERLBAUM: Here you have three mental health professionals, all of them in this case saying, Yes, this is a guy who has been doing well for a long time, everybody agrees. This is a guy who apparently poses no danger to anybody, everybody agrees. This is a guy who in many respects is ready for release right now.

And then there was Dr. Hegarty.

JUDGE ERLBAUM: And the director’s saying, well, there’s some truth to that, this guy’s doing really well.

But, for Dr. Hegarty said that even if Issa was doing really well, Creedmoor still needed to keep him longer. They had to get him to Level 4 privileges, to ease him back into society. But that was the level they’d never given him after all those years in the hospital.

JUDGE ERLBAUM: And the doctor believed that as far as she knows, it would never happen. So this is what it's gonna be for him forever. This is his existential situation: he's doing real well, everybody says he's doing real well, everybody says he'll probably make it, several doctors say it's unconscionable to keep him here longer. It's destructive.

Judge Erlbaum wrote in his decision that the hospital had been giving Issa 'false hope', that their promises of future release were nothing more than a 'pipe dream.' But Erlbaum saved his sharpest words for Dr. Hegarty and the report she had worked so hard on, saying that her conclusions about his being dangerous were 'wholly speculative' and that there was no 'credible reason' to deny Issa privileges. He wrote that keeping Issa in the hospital was 'unconscionable.'

The decision was clear.

In April 2009, Judge Erlbaum granted Issa a conditional release from Creedmoor. Freedom.

What had been called Issa's 'fantasies of success', his 'desire to be extraordinary'... those things would no longer be a deficit. In fact, you could argue that those were the very qualities that saved Issa from living out his entire life out at Creedmoor.

In a strange coincidence, Issa ended up moving off the ward on his birthday. Which he now calls his 're-birthday.'

ISSA: There was no tearful goodbyes. I thought I'd get that from some of them. But it was just like, 'Ok. Bye!'

L: Was there anyone on the ward who said a real goodbye to you?

ISSA: The guys... the guys get jeal—I really have to say, I understand it. Because I spent twenty years saying goodbye to guys. Saying goodbye to guys, even worse, who came after me, who left before me. There's a mix of 'Ok, good luck!' ... 'You sonofa...' So I knew exactly where they were coming from. It was just, 'Yeah, bye. Bye. Bye.'

Issa didn't go very far, at first. He had to move to a halfway house on Creedmoor's grounds. To prove he could handle his freedom.

It wasn't until 4 years later... that Issa got approved to move into his own apartment. And on a rainy day this March, I drove out to Creedmoor to meet him.

ISSA: Hello!

His arms were full of clothes on hangers in clear plastic dry cleaning bags.

ISSA: Is that thing waterproof? Let me just put this in your back seat. Or trunk maybe?

LAURA [TAPE]: Toss 'em on in.

ISSA: Oh man, so, uh... Today is March 12. Emancipation Day. This is my last day on Creedmoor grounds. (sighs) It's been a long time coming. Let me tell ya. It's just amazing. And you're driving me off. Who woulda thought? I was wondering who would be the person to drive me off the grounds, and it's you! That's great! That's great.

LAURA [TAPE]: Let's get in, right?

ISSA: Yeah.

I slowly made the turn out of the gates of Creedmoor...

ISSA: Here we go.

LAURA: ... and towards Issa's new home.

ISSA: Boy this is exciting. This is weird. Get those wipers on so I can see my future.

AMBI: windshield wipers FADE OUT

But what would happen with his family, now that he was out?

I went to see his brother Ishak, and his sister Karen. Karen was still living in the family home where Issa had killed his mother. They didn't even know that Issa had been released from the hospital. I had to break the news to them.

ISHAK: I pray he can find peace within himself, eventually, because that's a life sentence in itself.

KAREN: Poor Issa. I know that my mother would want us to be like she would be: forgive.

ISHAK: You know, and if I can't go to Issa and say: I forgive you, if I can't look him in the eye and tell him I forgive him, then what's the point? I don't know if I'll ever reach that point in my life. He's gonna take that one to the grave. So. All I can do is say a prayer. That's it.

AMBI: buzzer ring

I went to see Issa at his new apartment a few months after moving day...

AMBI: buzz in, door open

And his new life was in full swing. ...

LAURA [TAPE]: You look so different!

ISSA: I grew a beard, yeah, I don't know what made me do it...

He'd stayed up all night the night before, recording new songs. But he wasn't sure what to paint next, now that the Creedmoor era was over. One wall of his apartment was covered with giant blank canvases, waiting for color.

ISSA: And so I'm just looking at them, and keeping them up for the last couple of weeks, imagining what will go up.

There was one last thing I had to ask Issa. How did he feel with finally moving forward with his own life, after he'd taken his mother's?

ISSA: There's still guilt. There's still guilt. There'll always be.

But since he got out of the hospital, Issa says, something had shifted.

ISSA: It's gonna sound symptomatic, but I really do feel like when I'm alone and I'm creating, my mom is in the room with me.

I feel her. Like, when I'm finishing a painting, when I'm coming around the clubhouse turn on a painting, and I'm really just nailing it, I feel her just going, 'Yeah, that's it. That's it. That's it.'

When I'm writing a song, and it's almost done, and I'm playing it to myself, and it's sounding really good, like something I could never really write, she's there in the room going, 'That's it, that's good, I like that part.'

That's how she always was with me. She just loved the hell out of me. And she wouldn't want me to suffer.

For the first time in his life, Issa can close and lock his own door.

ISSA: Ok, I'm closing the door. (laughs) Take care.

AMBI: bolt clicks into place

LAURA: He's 48 years old.

AL LETSON: Thanks to our producer Laura Starecheski.

For more about this story, to see some of Issa's art work, and for some special content about schizophrenia, voices, delusions, and the insanity plea, you can go to our website, State of the Re:Union dot com.

The Hospital Always Wins, was produced by Laura Starecheski and edited by Deborah George and Taki Telonidis. Mix and sound design by Brendan Baker, research and production help from Kelsey Padgett. The rest of the SOTRU staff is business manager Brie Burge, and producers Tina Antolini and Delaney Hall. Our intern crew is Alyssa Pagano, Liz Mak, and Chris Gauthier.

SOTRU is presented by WJCT and distributed by PRX and NPR, with major funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. I'm Al Letson, and remember, things fall apart... it's our job to bring them back together.