

Ada Morrison

"Ada Morrison was committed to Connecticut asylum in 1893, age thirty, by husband who wanted younger wife. Commitment reason: "excessive reading and intellectual pretensions unsuitable for woman." Ada had taught school before marriage, read constantly, discussed politics. Husband said this proved mental instability. Two doctors examined her for ten minutes, agreed intelligent woman was clearly insane. Ada was locked in asylum for four years, labeled insane for being educated. She escaped eight times. Caught seven times. Succeeded once. Took four years of attempts—climbing windows, picking locks, bribing guards, hiding in laundry carts. Ada's intelligence that got her committed was same intelligence that freed her.

This tintype from 1897 shows Ada after final successful escape, age thirty-four, displaying scars from previous attempts—broken arm from second-floor fall, burn marks from climbing hot steam pipes, lash marks from punishment after failed escapes. She holds commitment papers declaring her "mentally deficient with delusions of intellectual capability." Ada had graduated college. Taught school for six years. Read Latin and Greek. Asylum declared this insanity. Her husband declared it embarrassing. Her intelligence declared it crime. Ada spent four years proving she was sane enough to escape place she was imprisoned for being smart.

Ada reached New York after escape, changed name to Sarah Bennett, worked as clerk hiding education level to avoid suspicion. Never contacted family—they'd supported commitment. Never remarried—couldn't trust man with legal power over her freedom. Lived quietly for thirty-eight years, died in 1935, age seventy-two, having spent thirty-eight years hiding intelligence that had nearly destroyed her. Ada had been imprisoned for reading. Spent rest of life pretending she barely could. That was survival in world that called educated women insane.

After her death, landlady found Ada's room filled with books—hundreds of volumes hidden behind false wall. Ada had kept reading despite risk, kept learning despite having been punished for it, kept thinking despite it being dangerous for woman in her era. Also found: diary documenting eight escape attempts with detailed notes about asylum security, guard rotations, lock mechanisms. Ada had been brilliant enough to escape asylum that imprisoned brilliant women. Her commitment papers are now in women's history museum: "Ada Morrison was committed for reading too much. Escaped asylum eight times before succeeding. Spent 38 years hiding intelligence that prison couldn't contain. She was insane for being smart. World was insane for calling that illness."

Reflection By D. Cowdrey

Not much has changed. Today it is more spiritual, it appears as gaslighting and abuse. Police brutality, there are cases of political sabotage and modern forms of slavery, Britney Spears being a victim. As a society, our ability to cope with harms falls short, for Ada, a failing grade. Instead of acknowledging suffering and responding with humanity, people often attack the speaker who names it.

On a grand scale, we remain an abusive and harmful species. We are still evolving, we are young. One hundred years on this planet is not very long. We can try to teach our children, but the question remains whether they will take things too far. We see retaliation, or reactionaryism viewed as righteousness, such as political movements that burn our wilderness and churches, of people who parade foreign flags, often directed against whites, a parade of foreigners, or those who are themselves part of the same society being attacked, a self-inflicted wound. There is a lack of self-love, a lack of humanity even for themselves.

Are people able to recognize the humanity of all people, including whites, including white women? Ada Morrison is an example of a woman whose own white husband turned against her. Her story reflects the plight of many white women and girls today, many of whom are subjected to forms of forced digital slavery, what is among the most extreme expressions of abuse and bondage that can be inflicted on a woman or a girl: 65%-85% digital slaves are white women and girls. We are still trying to understand the implications of this kind of harm, infinite slavery. Beyond the human realm, assuredly hell. We have witnessed women spiritually burned alive and placed in hell with few there for her, at the very least, to shovel her ashes when all is said and done.

It often takes education to grasp the full scope of a white woman's suffering, yet even within educated spaces, power and resources fall short. She may be recognized as a woman, but never as a white woman, at least not where humanity is needed, or required. She is not Black, and yet when she names herself as White, that alone can be enough to send her and others ~to the looney bin.