In the aftermath of my hospitalization and the subsequent spread of rumors about my mental health, I began to notice a distinct shift in how people in the mountains treated me. It was as though they perceived my mental health history as a contagious disease, manifesting in their behavior through a palpable desire to avoid any association with me. This avoidance wasn't just about fear of mental illness itself but seemed more focused on the social repercussions of being seen with me. It reflected a deeply ingrained stigma, where association with mental illness carried a perceived risk of social contagion.

Specific behaviors that illustrated this distancing included a sudden coldness from those who were previously friendly. If I approached someone with a simple greeting, their responses ranged from dead silence to minimal acknowledgment, barely concealing their discomfort. This behavior felt like a deliberate attempt to discourage any further interaction, as if my presence alone was unwelcome.

Even the most basic social courtesies, like saying "hi" or wishing someone a good night, were met with a kind of rejection that felt like a personal dismissal. It was clear that the stigma surrounding my mental health history had deeply influenced people's perceptions, leading them to act as though any form of engagement with me was something to be avoided at all costs. This pattern of avoidance and subtle rejection served as a constant reminder of the isolation imposed by societal misconceptions about mental health.

In the context of the pool hall, where I spent a significant amount of my time, the impact of the owner's deliberate spread of misinformation about me was particularly evident during tournaments. These tournaments were supposed to be about sportsmanship and camaraderie, yet the basic courtesies that underpin these values were often withheld from me.

A clear instance of this occurred in the aftermath of matches. It's customary, regardless of the outcome, for opponents to shake hands and acknowledge each other's efforts with a "good game." However, when I extended my hand in this gesture of sportsmanship, I was met with blank stares. This lack of response happened irrespective of whether they won or lost the match. Such behavior starkly illustrated how the stigma and rumors that surrounded me had seeped into these social rituals, altering how individuals interacted with me.

The refusal to engage in such a basic social courtesy as a handshake after a match went beyond mere personal rejection; it symbolized a broader societal failure to see beyond my mental health history. This action, or rather inaction, served as a poignant reminder of the isolation and exclusion fostered by stigma, even in settings meant to bring people together over shared interests.

The disregard for my boundaries became another glaring issue in how people interacted with me, further compounding the sense of alienation I felt. Individuals felt entitled to probe into my life with questions that were not just intrusive but blatantly inappropriate. This level of intrusiveness was not something I observed being directed at others, highlighting a specific disrespect towards my personal space and history.

The experience was akin to having my presence in any room diminished to zero. Normally, the presence of another person commands a certain level of respect and consideration, a recognition of their humanity that naturally discourages inappropriate or overly personal inquiries. This unspoken social contract ensures a basic level of respect and boundaries are maintained, preventing interactions from crossing into discomfort or disrespect. However, in my case, it seemed this mutual respect was absent.

This lack of consideration made it clear that the usual social precautions taken to avoid offending someone or invading their privacy were not extended to me. It felt as though the fact that I might be offended or hurt by their questions was of no consequence. This blatant disregard not only devalued my sense of self but also reinforced the feeling of being an outsider, someone whose feelings and boundaries were deemed irrelevant.  
  
The overarching theme in my experiences is a profound lack of respect for my boundaries, coupled with generally rude treatment from those around me. This consistent disregard suggests that my presence and personal space were not given the same consideration typically afforded to others. Such behavior underscores a deeper issue of devaluation, where I was not seen as worthy of the basic respect and courtesy that should be universal.

This treatment starkly contrasts with the principles of empathy, respect, and dignity that are foundational to healthy social interactions. The routine crossing of my boundaries and the rudeness I encountered reflect not just individual failings but a broader societal attitude towards those with mental health histories. It highlights a need for greater understanding, compassion, and respect for everyone's personal space and experiences, irrespective of their mental health background.

In my attempts to connect with people, specifically women I would meet in various settings, a recurring pattern emerged that further illustrated the impact of stigma on my social interactions. Initially, these encounters would begin positively, with what seemed like genuine interest and engagement. However, this dynamic would shift dramatically after they were exposed to the rumors and misinformation about my mental health history.

The change in their behavior was palpable the next time we met. Embarrassment became a common reaction; it was as though they felt ashamed for having interacted with me once the rumors reached them. This embarrassment often evolved into a desire to distance themselves, evidenced by their relieved sighs when our conversations ended or when they thought I was out of earshot. Their facial expressions would change, and their tone of voice would become condescending, treating me with a palpable lack of respect.

This cycle of initial engagement followed by withdrawal and condescension upon hearing rumors about me highlights a troubling aspect of social stigma. The misinformation not only affects how individuals see me but also influences their behavior, leading them to act in ways that reinforce feelings of isolation and rejection. This pattern underscores the powerful role that societal perceptions and rumors can play in shaping personal interactions, often to the detriment of those who are already marginalized.

In the pool hall where I frequently spent my time, an incident occurred that highlighted both the competitive spirit of the place and the undercurrents of rivalry and disparagement I faced. A female player, exceptionally skilled and on par with some of the top male players in the hall, entered the scene and quickly became the center of attention. Her prowess at the table was notable, drawing crowds whenever she played, partly because of her gender and partly because of her undeniable talent.

During a tournament, I was matched against her. The anticipation was high, given her reputation and skill level. In a turn of events that felt both significant and validating, I won the match against her. This victory was not just against a formidable opponent but also occurred in a context where my achievements were routinely minimized or dismissed, especially by the pool hall owner.

This owner had a habit of undermining my accomplishments, perhaps feeling threatened by my presence and successes. After my victory against the highly skilled female player, another match was on the horizon. When choosing tables for the next game, I suggested moving to a different table for a change of scenery and perhaps strategy. However, the owner interjected, suggesting we play on the same table where I had just won, calling it my "lucky table." This comment, seemingly innocuous, carried with it an implication that my success was more due to luck than skill, subtly attempting to discount the achievement of winning against a well-regarded player. This interaction was emblematic of the ongoing efforts to belittle my accomplishments within the pool hall environment.

The reaction to my talents and intelligence often came with a tone of surprise or underestimation, which felt like a constant undermining of my abilities. Comments that seemed complimentary on the surface, like "you're actually a pretty smart guy," carried an implicit suggestion that this was an unexpected revelation. Growing up in the mountains, I was often referred to as a genius, a recognition of my intellectual capabilities by those who knew me well. Thus, when people prefaced their acknowledgment of my intelligence with "actually," it felt both diminishing and patronizing.

The use of "actually" in these contexts wasn't just a word choice; it was indicative of a broader perception. It suggested that despite my known history of being highly intelligent, the prevailing narrative—shaped perhaps by my mental health history or the rumors spread about me—was one of low expectations. This contrast between my known intellectual capacity and the surprised acknowledgment of it highlighted a disconnect in how I was perceived versus who I truly was.

Being described as "pretty smart" in this context was, in essence, a backhanded compliment. It minimized my intelligence to merely above average, despite a lifetime of being recognized for much more. This type of interaction was emblematic of the broader challenges I faced: a constant need to prove myself against a backdrop of diminished expectations and misconceptions about my capabilities.

The dismissive and disparaging treatment I received often extended into my social interactions, where even basic exchanges like greetings or farewells were met with silence or outright avoidance. This pattern of behavior wasn't just limited to verbal interactions; it also manifested in the way people engaged with me in activities, such as playing pool. On the surface, some individuals would extend what appeared to be a gesture of inclusion or normalcy by playing a game or two of pool with me. However, these token gestures of courtesy were often followed by their withdrawal and subsequent spread of derogatory comments about me, particularly highlighting my mental health history as a point of ridicule or concern.

When I demonstrated skill in pool, winning games against my opponents, the reaction wasn't recognition of my talent but rather a belittlement of my achievements. Comments like "all he does is play pool" were used to undermine my victories, insinuating that my success at the game was the result of having nothing else of value to occupy my time with, rather than a reflection of genuine skill or passion. This narrative served to discredit me further, painting me as one-dimensional and unworthy of genuine respect or acknowledgment.

Moreover, on the rare occasions when my abilities were acknowledged, it was done so in a way that attributed my success to external factors, such as having a good teacher, rather than my own talent or hard work. The implication that "somebody's taught him well" suggests that my proficiency in pool—or any skill for that matter—couldn't possibly be a result of my own efforts or natural ability. Instead, it was framed as if my achievements were solely due to the influence of others, further diminishing my sense of agency and personal accomplishment.

These experiences underscore a persistent effort to minimize and invalidate my achievements and qualities, reflecting a broader unwillingness to recognize or appreciate anything "innately good" about me. This pattern of behavior not only isolated me but also reinforced a narrative that stripped away my individuality and undermined my self-worth.

Encountering individuals who held such a low opinion of me that they seemed almost offended by my mere attempt to engage in conversation was not uncommon. These interactions were often characterized by dismissive looks, behaviors, and gestures—rudeness that was subtle yet unmistakable in its intent. This pattern of behavior served as a continuous reminder of their perceived superiority over me and reinforced the notion that I was somehow less than those around me.

The subtlety of these dismissals made them no less impactful. It's one thing to face overt rejection or hostility, but the undercurrents of disdain that permeated these interactions added a layer of complexity to navigating social spaces. The message was clear, even if not always loudly stated: in their eyes, I did not matter. This pervasive attitude of dismissiveness and rudeness not only isolated me further but also underscored a deeply ingrained belief among some individuals that certain people, due to aspects of their identity or history, are undeserving of basic respect and dignity.

While grappling with the stigma and disparagement that marked my social interactions, I encountered a paradox in the way some individuals treated me. On one hand, I was this marginalized figure, viewed with a certain level of disdain or pity, someone others did not want to acknowledge as an equal. This perception seemed to cast a long shadow, defining much of my social existence and interactions within the community.

On the other hand, there were moments when kindness and respect were extended towards me, albeit often in what felt like a superficial or tokenistic manner. This duality in behavior—where moments of apparent respect or kindness were juxtaposed against a backdrop of stigma and disparagement—created a confusing and sometimes disheartening social landscape. It was as if the kindness shown was more about the giver's desire to feel good about themselves or to adhere to social niceties, rather than a genuine recognition of my humanity and worth.

This conditional and inconsistent approach to kindness highlighted the complexities of navigating social relationships when one is stigmatized. It underscored the reality that, despite occasional gestures of goodwill, the prevailing view of me as someone less deserving of genuine respect and equality remained largely unchallenged. This situation not only perpetuated feelings of isolation but also emphasized the superficial nature of some interactions, making it difficult to form authentic connections or to feel fully valued within the community.

Navigating social spaces often felt like moving through a minefield of potential embarrassment for others, simply because of my presence. The notion that interacting with me could somehow tarnish their social standing was a recurring theme, highlighting the pervasive stigma attached to my identity. It was as if my mere association was deemed contagious, capable of diminishing others' perceptions of those seen with me. This led to situations where individuals who had previously engaged in conversation with me would exhibit visible discomfort at the prospect of doing so again, particularly in public or within their social circles. Their behavior suggested a fear of being embarrassed by association, reinforcing the idea that my worth to them was conditional and largely negative.

Moreover, the underlying sentiment that I encountered repeatedly was the belief that I possessed no intrinsic worth as a person. My value was seemingly measured solely by what I could offer or how I could be of use to others, often relegating me to the role of a last resort—someone to turn to only when all other options had been exhausted. This utilitarian view of my worth not only diminished my sense of self but also emphasized a transactional nature to interactions that should, in essence, be grounded in mutual respect and recognition of each other's inherent dignity.

This perception of being valuable only for my utility, combined with the stigma of being seen as an embarrassment, created a profound sense of isolation and worthlessness. It underscored a deeply ingrained societal issue where individuals are judged and valued based on superficial and stigmatized understandings of their identity, rather than being recognized and appreciated for their inherent human worth.  
  
The acknowledgment of my needs, even in environments where transactions should theoretically neutralize personal biases, often became a source of visible frustration for others. This was starkly evident in places like the pool hall, where engaging in a simple act of ordering food—as any paying customer would—could become a loaded interaction. Despite being a patron with the expectation of service, my requests were met with resistance and, at times, outright demeaning responses.

An instance that encapsulates this treatment involved the owner of the pool hall. Upon placing a food order, which was a standard expectation of his establishment, his reaction was not just unprofessional but also personally disparaging. He questioned why I always chose to order food precisely when he was about to take a break, framing my timing as inconvenient or deliberately troublesome. His use of "feed you right now," particularly the word "feed," carried a dehumanizing connotation, likening me to an animal rather than acknowledging me as a customer deserving of respect. This interaction was emblematic of the broader issue: my mere existence and expression of basic needs were seen as an imposition or a nuisance, underscoring a lack of respect and dignity afforded to me.

This experience in a commercial setting, where customer service should theoretically override personal prejudices, starkly highlighted the pervasive nature of the stigma I faced. It reinforced the painful reality that my societal worth was perceived as diminished, not just in social interactions but even in transactions where my status as a customer should have ensured a baseline of respect and decency.

The spectrum of respect I encountered varied, yet the balance was overwhelmingly tipped towards the lower end, frequently verging on outright disrespect. This inconsistency in treatment illuminated a broader societal issue: while some individuals might have shown a modicum of respect or decency, these instances were exceptions rather than the rule. The prevailing tendency was to treat me with a marked lack of respect, often devaluing my presence, contributions, and basic human dignity.

This skewed distribution of respect, heavily leaning towards minimal or non-existent, underscores a deep-seated stigma and prejudice that colored much of my interactions. It reflects a troubling reality where the mere knowledge of my mental health history or other personal circumstances could heavily influence how I was perceived and treated by others. This environment of pervasive disrespect not only impacted my social interactions but also affected my self-esteem and sense of belonging within the community.

Facing challenges in securing employment added another layer to the difficulties I encountered due to societal stigma. Many business owners and managers were courteous during the initial application process, a facade that quickly crumbled upon any follow-up. Their demeanor would shift from polite disinterest to finding excuses, signaling a clear intent to distance themselves. This pattern wasn't just about rejecting a potential employee; it was indicative of a broader reluctance to associate their business with someone carrying the stigma I did.

This experience of being systematically pushed away, even in professional contexts where qualifications and abilities should be the primary consideration, highlights the pervasive impact of societal prejudices. The consistent rejection and the transparent eagerness of these businesses to avoid any further engagement with me underscored a harsh reality: the stigma attached to my past and my identity extended far beyond personal interactions, deeply affecting my ability to find employment and achieve economic stability. This rejection from potential employers not only limited my professional opportunities but also reinforced feelings of isolation and worthlessness, compounding the social challenges I already faced.  
  
I have good reason to believe that they were very, very grotesquely exaggerated, horrific things said about me concerning my mental health history and about why I was at this hospital, that they're so foul that they're like unspeakable.