Dancing
A fifteen-year-old’s descent into madness

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The author is a member of the Class of 2015 at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. This essay won second prize in the 2012 Helen H. Glaser Student Essay Competition. Ms. Babin writes: “For two years after I graduated from college I worked at a group home for severely emotionally disturbed children. These children suffered from a range of conditions from attention deficit disorder to paranoid schizophrenia, and their behaviors reflected such disorders. On a number of occasions I observed the suffering of a child reliving his or her trauma and decompensating as a result. The following is a fictional narrative relating one such experience.”

Dancing.

It’s 7:32 in the morning and I’m locked in a cage. 6 ft x 8 ft room of control, of peace. but there is no peace or control here. there’s just Me, My thoughts, and Staff Number One who keeps looking at Me through the window. I holler at Her to stop, to leave Me alone, to let Me out, to get Me a gun; anything. She just stares back at Me through bored eyes and sighs, as if My being locked up is all just an inconvenience to Her.

this cancer eats away at My brain. a banquet hall full of diners feast on My memories, ideas and dreams until I no longer know what’s Real. I hear them talking, in whispers or amplified, telling Me stories I know not to be true. a life I once had, long before I was in this cell. the chatter becomes overwhelming as breakfast wraps up. everyone is talking about their plans for the day, failing to realize that no one is going anywhere while that door is locked.

some of them ask Me questions. I try to ignore them, to pretend they don’t exist. if I can just prove to the Staff—I just want to go home. they keep asking and giggling between My ears, and it’s all too much to handle.

just go away I implore them, but the laughing only grows louder. taunting
and singing and laughing; they all over-
ride My will to be Out. I desperately
search for something to drown out the
noise, but in this cell I’m not even al-
lowed shoelaces.

i knock on my temple—the doorbell
to my brain. hi, i say. can you guys keep
it down please? i wring my hands and
climb up walls. the room gets smaller,
or my head is getting bigger, and i feel
like i’m running out of air. someone
starts singing in French. i didn’t even
know i understood French, but it feels
appropriate to put on my tutu and take
the stage. i spin and spin and practice
my Pointe; soon i’ll be ready for the
show.

12:03 and time for Meds. i sit in
the corner and giggle with my friends
in French and relish in the jokes Staff
Number One doesn’t understand. i am
handed: 1 pink oval pill, 1 yellow round
pill, 2 blue round pills, a capsule filled
with itty bitty purple beads, and 2 flint-
stones vitamins. they are my favorite.
i eat the vitamins and throw the pills
back at the Staff—i’m not feeling very
colorful today.

i know i’m in trouble when the
Doctor comes to check on me. i can
hear the Doctor and the Staff talking
outside the door. They say words i
don’t understand, like Decompensation,
Psychosis, Schizophrenia. He likes to
say long words to make Himself feel
smart. He hands me small pieces of
a Rainbow and promises i’ll feel bet-
ter. the Doctor asks how i’m doing. je
suis bien, merci, i reply. my Friends
laugh at His confusion—how could He
not speak French after all this time?
He reaches out His hand to touch my
shoulder but touching stray dogs is
dangerous and i bite at Him. His skin
is brown and i think He must taste
like chocolate but He pulls His hand
away and only then am i reminded that
chocolate is in fact bad for dogs. that
was a near miss.

He mumbles in a language i don’t
understand. Je ne comprends pas, i
inform him. His lips are curled and
His jaw is slack and i’m pretty sure His
tongue doesn’t work anymore. it just
flops around like my goldfish did when
i took him out of his bowl. thinking
about my goldfish makes me sad and i
don’t want to listen to the Doctor any-
more. s’il vous plait sortez-vous. je suis
fatiguée et j’ai besoin de repos. i ask
politely at first, but pleasantries never
get you far with the Staff. i knock on
my door again—can You Guys get him
to leave? can’t You hear me? i must
knock harder.

the Doctor stands up and knocks
on His own door and They let Him
out. He must know the secret knock
because i’ve been banging on that door
for hours and i’ve gotten nothing. i’m
smarter than They all think i am and
when i get out of here i will take my
tutu and my wings and dance on the
stage. my ears perk up at the sound of
the Doctor giving Staff Number One
the Secret Code: 5150. i know that
Code although i don’t know why and
my body tenses up even as i teach my-
self le subjonctif. our time is short and
I must break free, so I ask Puis-je aller à la toilette, s'il vous plaî?

success! I'm told to sit quietly for five minutes to prove that I can sit quietly for five minutes, and I do but they don't know that I don't need to open my mouth to talk to my friends. They floss their teeth with my nerves and tell me stories of Paris in the spring of 1952 while I focus all my attention on keeping Us perfectly still and they smoke cigarettes and drink espresso—any flinch, spasm, imbalance will make the staff believe we're not ready.

five minutes fly by like eons and we're allowed out. very slowly I get up, trying not to smile because they'll know something is wrong if I'm too happy. Three of them walk us to the bathroom but I'm 15 and they're not allowed to come in with us. Staff Number One goes in and makes sure there is nothing dangerous that we could get a hold of—the cabinet is locked under the sink and the mirror is just a piece of plastic with a mirrored coating. She takes the roll of toilet paper and starts unraveling it. One or two? She asks. I hold up my fingers without making eye contact (I just know we'll burst out laughing if they lock us in the eyes) and she does out the correct amount. I never understood this but I heard that one girl tried to eat an entire roll of toilet paper so I guess the staff are worried about that. People in here are crazy.

They close the door and though I know they're all sitting there waiting for us to come out I relish in our isolation. I look around this smallest of sanctuaries and breathe the sweet smell of Clorox and hand soap. We start humming "tiptoe through the tulips" and I do a couple pirouettes before my eye notices the plunger. How could staff number one forget to take the plunger? I twist it in my hands like a baton and decide to lead the parade down a new victory lane. I march among elephants and clowns and bands and brass and when I get home I will take the stage and dance.

my friends start reciting Shakespeare in French in my head even though I know Shakespeare was English but it gives me an idea. Hark! what light through yonder window breaks and while the window to the outside is made out of unbreakable plastic the window to the Other side isn't. like a javelin thrower in the Olympics, I take my stance and hurl the plunger into the silver window. a scuffmark is all I have to show for my first attempt, and I hear the staff hearing my noise. They start to worry and I know I have to make haste! swinging like a baseball player I strike the silver window once, twice, thrice, and on the fourth time it shatters. Like music with a thumping baseline the staff are trying to break down the door but I'm 15 and they're not allowed in the bathroom with me so it's the only door in the whole house with a lock on the inside.

my friends are all talking at the same time giving advice of what to do with the broken fake mirror. the talking becomes raucous and I'd like it to end but I know they won't listen to me if I ask so I just start singing louder. I want to paint a picture; I know body paint only comes in one color even though there are two colors before it comes out of your body and I decide to paint a red balloon. I will carry it through the parade and wear it on my wrist as I dance for the life I used to have.

suddenly the door breaks in and they're on me like lions on a wildebeest. I remember this from years before; the group of men, being pinned down, the pain. I won't go through it again. I won't! there are six of me and only five of them and the odds are in my favor, but the staff are older than I am and stronger. My arms are slippery from the paint and I hold my shard of mirror like a sword of valor—I will slay the dragon and save the princesses and dance and sing and carry my red balloon all the way home. I dodge and weave their fiery breath, and slash with my broadsword (ho!) but my friends are cowering behind my ears and aren't helping at all.

it only feels like days that we've been struggling in the wet bathroom when more men show up. my red arms are wound in staff number one's thick curly hair; they'll have to cut me out if she wants her head back. the men and the staff are trying to untangle me from staff number one and I bang her...
head on the ground as i bang my head on the ground; everyone needs a beat to dance to.

i know i'll win because there are Rules to this game and the Rules say I'm 15 and They aren't allowed to tie me down and They have to get me medical attention if i need it. i'll go off-campus to the clinic and then my Therapist will come and buy me ice cream because it's been Such A Rough Day. but i don't recognize these new Men as other Staff and i start to struggle harder. five of Them lift me up and we walk like a retarded royal Egyptian procession; They are carrying me like their queen, i am dragging Staff Number One along like my dog, one of the Men is trying to get me to let go of Her hair. i laugh at the thought of my newfound royalty and at the trail of biological breadcrumbs we're leaving as they walk me out the front.

in that moment of laughter, of lightness, i don't think to look at the chariot that is parked out front, nor how it's different, nor the way the bed is specially made. the Man gets my hand out of Staff Number One's hair which isn't fair because i'm distracted by the lights and noises and horses drawing the chariot. was it my bad timing or theirs? they lower me onto the bed as gently as a missile to the ground and before i can spit on more than one of Them my wrists and ankles are bound. they've paralyzed me! i hear other unfamiliar words; Safety, St. Vincent's, Haldol, Stabilization, and i know i won't be dancing anymore.

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