



DANCING

A fifteen-year-old's descent into madness

Lisa Babin


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 override My will to be Out. I desperately search for something to drown out the noise, but in this cell I'm not even allowed 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.

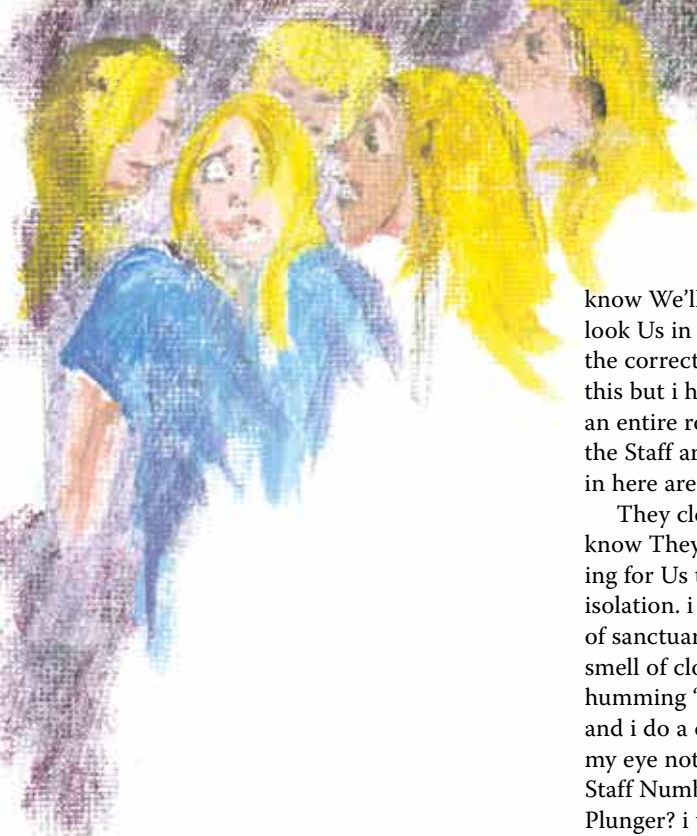
12:03 and time for Meds. i sit in the corner and giggle with my friends in French and relish in the jokes Staff Number One doesn't understand. i am handed: 1 pink oval pill, 1 yellow round pill, 2 blue round pills, a capsule filled with itty bitty purple beads, and 2 flintstones vitamins. they are my 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 better. 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 anymore. *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 myself *le subjonctif*. our time is short and



i must break free, so i ask *Puis-je aller à la toilette, s'il vous plaît?* glanced at and rejected but They don't speak French so i try again. *may i please go to the bathroom?*

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 look Us in the eyes) and She doles 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 twirl 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

About Lisa Babin



After graduating from Boston University in 2006 with a degree in psychology and visual art, I had the pleasure of diving headfirst into "life experience" at a group home for severely emotionally disturbed children. It is from this that I derive my strength as I pursue a career in medicine. I am currently an MS2 at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, and hope to enjoy a long career as a doctor of emergency medicine.

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 its 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 light-
ness, 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 spe-
cially 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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