

LOOSE THREADS

Elizabeth Austin

When there is mental illness in your family, you're always worried that you might be going crazy. What starts as a bad mood could be the beginning of an episode. Get too excited about something benign and you could be cycling up into mania. And if you're hearing voices, that's a non-starter. It's straight to the psych ward for a month to get your meds right until you are "no longer a danger to yourself or others."

"What's that?" I say aloud, to no one or to her, if she's here at all.

I'm crouched over the toilet and I hear a light tapping, like a conductor's baton on a music stand signaling to the orchestra that it's time to begin. The bathroom is empty and my shaky voice ricochets off the walls. Through the crack in the stall door, I see that the faucet is dripping. I take a deep breath and exhale slowly, then I pull up my jeans and hustle out to the big room.

I've been living in this old costume warehouse in Queens for three days. I lost my job and had nowhere else to go. I slept on the street that first night and then it came to me like a light bulb in a cartoon. The warehouses. With all the theatres closed, no one is going to the warehouses.

The Broadway warehouses are like a faraway country you never plan to visit. You know it exists, you might buy its local spices at the grocery store, but you will never step foot on its soil. Now here I am, knee-deep in the dirt.

When I reenter the big room, I walk slowly through the rows of costumes hanging on long metal racks, running my fingers over layers of chiffon and polyester. The rhythm is soothing and so is the history. Romeo and Juliet, Miss Julie and Miss Saigon; they were all dressed in these robes. Now they hang lifeless, gathering dust in this musty warehouse while the pandemic rages on outside. It's been more than a year with no end in sight, which means I have this place to myself for the foreseeable future.

When I reach the wall, I hear the quick patter of footsteps and a child's voice whispers, "Will you play with me?"

It's always the same. She wants to play. Like this is all some game.

My mother heard voices too but they were nasty, spurring her into violence. This voice is sweet, friendly, and noticeably young.

The wall is covered with wigs and jewelry that dangles off hooks. The sunlight streaming in from the windows high above hits these plastic and glass trinkets and casts rainbow light on the floor. A small

shadow cuts through the light, a child's hand making bunny ears. I move toward the shadow and it vanishes.

"It's okay," I whisper tentatively, not knowing who or what I'm speaking to. "You can come out. I won't hurt you."

I wait in silence for several seconds. Nothing. Am I going crazy? Is this what schizophrenia feels like?

That night I sleep fitfully. I hear the child's voice in my dreams. "We have to hide," she warns me. "She's coming."

"Who's coming?" I ask.

Then I'm jolted awake by the sharp crack of lightning, followed by the percussive sound of heavy rainfall. I sit up slowly, twisted in a rough blanket of men's overcoats and fake furs. The storm outside rattles the windows, and it takes me a minute to remember where I am. My stomach growls and reality sinks in. I haven't felt this vulnerable since childhood.

When the morning comes, I decide to make a game plan. I have some food left but I'll need to get more soon. I start walking along the perimeter of the warehouse, pulling my thoughts together. I

pause next to a row of formal dresses, resting my hand on the metal rod supporting them.

Then I hear the rustle of tulle on satin and look down at the floor. A small bare foot is peeking out from under Cinderella's blue ball gown.

She's real, this little person. She's not a figment or a specter, she's a lost girl, hiding in this warehouse, like me.

The ball gown shivers and the foot disappears beneath it.

"It's okay, you can come out. I won't hurt you. I want to play too," I say gently.

The ball gown moves ever so slightly and I hear her careful, small footsteps behind the rack and then behind me.

"Hello," she says softly, pronouncing both syllables.

I turn around slowly, so as not to startle her, and when I'm face-to-face with her I freeze. My heart starts beating wildly. I feel hot and lightheaded and I stumble back in shock.

It's me. I'm looking at me when I was seven years old, the year Mama had her episode. When she held my head under water in the bathtub while I clawed at her hands, trying unsuccessfully to loosen

her grip. She held me there until the world disappeared and I woke up in the hospital.

This younger me peers up expectantly. Her black, curly hair is tangled and matted. Her dress is a faded pattern of blue and pink flowers, and the seam on the right side is ripped and ragged. Her eyes are ringed with dark circles and filled with worry, making them look older than the rest of her.

“Will you play with me?” she asks cautiously. I nod slowly, not knowing how else to respond.

“It’s scary all alone,” she says resolutely, reaching her hand out toward me. “I would like a friend.”

“You don’t need to worry anymore,” I reply. “I’m a grown up and I’ll take care of us.” When I take her small hand in mine, she disappears.

THE END