

## Hearing My Sister's Voices

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August 2, 1998; Page C1

On a spring day in 1994, my oldest sister called from St. Louis to tell me I was dead. She spoke officially, as if she were a tour guide for the Pentagon. "When you were a baby," she explained, "Mom put you in a basket under the yellow sun and I watched you burn and melt. The earth cracked open and you fell in. When you emerged you were a replica of yourself. An impostor."

She would tell me this story again and again during that Easter season, several times a day, at 8 a.m., 11 p.m., 3 a.m. I was the one she always turned to. By the end of the week, I had purchased a plane ticket. I would fly to St. Louis and stand at her door and prove to her that I was, in fact, alive. She could pinch me if she wanted to. "See," I would say. "It's me."

She had always been different. Now she was something else, something I could not name until I eventually filed an affidavit to have her involuntarily committed to the state mental hospital where she was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic.

My sister, six years my senior and the oldest of five children, has passed along a lot of crooked information. All my life I have been listening. Even now, even after the diagnosis, it is difficult at times for me to know with certain clarity what is truth and what is delusion. She was always the smart one. She won citywide art awards in high school. She taught herself to play, flawlessly, by ear, the piano solo from Eric Clapton's "Layla." She read Dickens, Tolstoy, the King James Bible, teaching me to follow suit. Before the illness, or perhaps as it was slowly unfolding, she taught herself German and Italian and how to sing opera. One Halloween, she dressed me up as Virna Lisi, and I proudly quoted my sister as I explained to my 16-year-old buddies that Lisi was "a late '60s B-movie screen goddess."

When we are young our older siblings tell us that thunder is the sound of angels bowling and we believe them. Such is the fabric of sibling trust.

Those of us who are close to the mentally ill want so much to believe that our loved one is simply different, perhaps even chosen, blessed. We struggle with the idea that we are somehow at fault, that we let things slip, that at some crucial moment we turned the other way. We must constantly rope ourselves in, remind ourselves that the illness is just that--an illness, impartial, arbitrary, and that it needs to be fixed.

Voices told Joan of Arc to go into battle, and St. Teresa of Avila had a vision that she was "pierced" by the love of God. Both women were sainted. Today, perhaps they would be institutionalized. Perhaps it is no mistake that in slang we say that crazy people are "touched." There is a certain wisdom and creative beauty in my sister's mental illness. Even her story of my death is eloquent, rich in detail, motion, color. It is that individual

brilliance we sometimes glorify, hold on to. Often, hallucinations seem to be all that crazy people have to work with. Take away the dreams, we fear, and they go blank.

I come from a family of Catholic, rural European immigrants, and much of familial life seemed dense with the macabre, raw faith, premonitions. My grandfather's sister suffered from symptoms that I now believe were schizophrenia. At times, she destroyed things in her house with a hammer, convinced that they were evil. She would call mom at 3 a.m. to ask, "How is your mother?" seeming to forget at those odd hours that my grandmother had been dead a full 10 years.

Which immigrant brought the illness to America? I imagine schizophrenia as a forgotten acorn in a peasant's pocket, a memento from the Old World, carelessly overlooked by customs. And I've often wondered whether it would ever show up in my house, with my children.

My sister tells me that her doctor says this: "Maybe it is hereditary. Maybe it is the Holy Ghost. The point is, to live with such hallucinations is more than any human can endure. Take your medication."

By now, many of us have come to learn, tragically, what can happen when a paranoid schizophrenic stops taking the medication. My sister recalls with shocking detail the horrible hallucinations and delusions that used to terrorize her: a nephew's head sitting on top of her VCR laughing at her and sticking out his tongue as she tried to watch the news; flying saucers on top of downtown buildings beaming green and purple cuss words into her brain as she passed by; a devil raping her. She calls me often to review the past, as if checking to see if it happened. She tells me she will never stop taking her medication.

After my flight to St. Louis, my brother and I stood on her front porch. We knocked, but she didn't answer. I yelled, "Open up. It's me."

Finally, she cracked the door. "Who are you?" she asked.

She let us in after a few minutes. She showed me pictures, dozens of family photos I had seen many times. In every shot she had carefully, meticulously cut out my image. There was the family at Christmas with a hole where I should have been. She said she burned the pieces along with our grandmother's Bible, a handful of costume jewelry and a rotted fox stole in the back yard grill.

"You look like you," she said. My presence seemed to confuse her, puncturing her fiction. We told her that we were going to the hospital and that we wanted her to come with us. We told her this many times. "Just a minute," she would say, then freeze as if listening. Finally, she would reply, in a different, raspy voice, "He says I don't have to go."

We left. We drove to the state mental hospital to sign affidavits, and on the way I realized she had not once asked what I was doing in St. Louis, how I had gotten there, where I

was planning to stay. My brother parked his cherry-red Charger in a visitor space, and we both sat there a while and cried. St. Louis State hospital, now closed, was a spooky, Gothic building with tall, dark, barred windows that inspired many childhood stories. I had never once considered that someone I knew would have to go to a place like that.

Inside, as we wandered the halls looking for the right departmental office, we passed sealed doors with faded signs that said, "In Case of Elopement Ring Bell." Elopement. I had to think about that for a minute. Such a romantic word for the terror that must be associated with escape.

The hospital discharged my sister three weeks later with no plans for follow up. The state can afford only so much. They handed her a bottle of pills, which she promptly threw in the trash. Confidentiality laws barred me from talking to her doctors. I had a week's worth of questions. Not one was answered.

During the next six months, she was arrested several times, once after a high-speed highway chase that ended with her car blowing up. She stole her neighbor's mail for a month. She threw her kitchen glasses at another neighbor's house. She called the chief of police of Rome more than 20 times one week to explain, in Italian, that the pope needed to be arrested. She poured a bottle of vodka into her car's gas tank. Finally, the police took her back to the hospital where she stayed for three months, received counseling, proper medication. I will always remember the day I sat in the chilly visitor's room and she said, finally, to my relief, "I have something called paranoid schizophrenia."

She knows I am writing this story. On the phone she presented me with a list of things to include: how no one would hire her as the illness progressed because her appearance and mannerisms began to change; how she was unemployed for five years; how the joblessness and low self-worth contributed to her madness; how she went through her savings; how the paint cracked off her one-bedroom, 100-year-old house; how the snow and rain forced a hole in the roof above her bathroom; how it took three years for us to get her on disability.

Today, on medication and living alone in her house in St. Louis, my sister no longer reads. She doesn't follow movies or the lives of stars. She doesn't cook, sing or play music or paint anymore. She stands too close to people. She rocks back and forth. She doesn't bathe very often. Mostly, she sits in her broken chair in the front room of her house and chain smokes and thinks about the past, the future, the state of the world, and then she writes it all down, sending letters to important people who never respond. She fixates on people, mostly men, who are clearly out of reach. She recently gave up on Piero Marini, the pope's master of ceremonies, after sending countless letters and notes. "I'm nobody," she said to me the other day, her words heavy with the realization that no one, ever, is going to take her to that place where the azaleas forever bloom. And every night when she tries to go to bed, small devil stand around her head and poke at her face, depriving her of sleep.

A day or so after the Capitol shootings, my sister called, as she does whenever a paranoid schizophrenic makes the news. Always, she is upset, agitated, afraid. "Do you think I could kill someone?" she asks. Always, my answer is firm, simple. "Don't ever stop taking your medication."

We talk it out, and the conversation often ends with this: "He didn't know what he was doing," she says. "They have to understand."

She pleads with me, as if I can somehow call people up, shout from a mountaintop, make everything right.

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