

September 2019 Edition - I hear voices, but I am learning to ignore them



Jeremy Sundahl

I hear voices, but I am learning to ignore them

I'm joined by a bald man in dark sunglasses known by the name of "Bruce" for some late-night TV in the psych ward. Since his admittance nearly a month ago, I haven't been able to catch a glance at his bare eyes. The sunglasses acting as a kind of protective force field between him and the material world. But who am I to judge? Only a few months ago, I wore my boots to bed every night. And you would, too, if a criminal syndicate as vicious as the Black Clan was after you. (How did I know they were after me? Let's just say they were masters of the art of telepathy.)

As usual, we – the patients of the University of British Columbia Psychosis Program –

are huddled around the TV. This residential care hospital is in a locked ward on the second floor of a concrete building that is mostly filled with doctors' offices. You could walk by the building without even knowing we are here. But we are here and right now, the centre of our lives is The Food Network. We are watching intently as a rosy old woman rubs salt on baked potatoes. Her hands move quickly – a splash of oil, a sprinkle of salt, then rub, rub, rub!

Vicky isn't watching, though. Constantly pacing, she yells curses as she traipses past the door to wherever she's going. We all give her a glance, but our eyes shoot back to the TV.

We are riveted by what's happening to the potatoes.

In different ways, all our lives have fallen apart. I don't know the stories of everyone, but I do know why we're here. This is a provincial program and so every patient here has already failed treatment in our own communities. I spent weeks in a Prince George hospital 800 kilometres north of here, for example. None of us has had much control over our lives since we became ill. We don't know what's going to happen to us when we leave here or whether the voices in our heads will ever give us peace. There is something

mesmerizing about the woman on the TV, who creates a culinary masterpiece from ordinary ingredients, day in and day out.

I was 24 years old and just six months into my postsecondary education when I began experiencing psychosis, about a year ago. My aspirations to be a sound engineer and song writer were completely disrupted. I'll never forget huddling on the sofa, forcing my eyes to stay open all night long because the Black Clan was threatening to torture me if I fell asleep. You can't get much homework done in that state.

Toward the end of the episode, an older patient jumps up and full-on sprints out of the room. I'm not sure why, but none of us ask. It's kind of an unspoken rule to keep to yourself around here.

Perhaps inspired by the elderly cook's energy, I decide to work on an assignment for an online English course I'm enrolled in. It's been months since I last looked at it. At the nurses' station, I ask for a one-hour pass, the maximum I'm allowed for an unaccompanied leave, and also for my laptop. Most patients use these passes for a smoke break, but I need this one mostly so that I can access WiFi. A nurse unlocks my computer from a cabinet and gives it to me with a smile.

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I find a place to sit in the lobby downstairs. The lobby is intended for people who are arriving for doctors' appointments and is set up a bit like a hotel lounge, albeit a slightly seedy hotel. I stare at the screen. Try to make words pop up. Minutes tick by. I try to collect my thoughts, but it's like pulling flies out of honey. They're stuck. Is it depression? Or is it the powerful anti-psychotic medication, clozapine, that has also caused me to gain a lot of weight? It could be both of these. Exhausted, I check the time. Fourteen minutes are left. I've only got half a sentence down. I type really, really fast. Four more words! Time's up. Back to my room. But first – a cigarette!

Outside, Gary is standing in front of the No Smoking sign, where the smokers hang out. He immediately asks me if I like maps. I respond with a nod to be polite, knowing that it's a tactical error. The rest of my smoke break is filled with Gary talking about maps. Political maps. Topographic maps. Road maps from before there were even cars. Luckily, another patient comes outside and distracts Gary long enough for me to make my escape.

In the morning I wake up to a mysteriously upbeat piano tune as the sun slants through my curtains. It sounds like I'm in a saloon from the 1840s and I

briefly wonder if I'm psychotic again. The music is blasting out of Bruce's room. Bruce, with his sunglasses, has always seemed more like a Led Zeppelin kind of guy than a tinkly piano guy. Later, during a smoke break outside, I ask Bruce about it. This may be the most personal question I've asked anybody here. He seems a bit apprehensive, but eventually, he blurts out that the music is a recording of his grandmother playing the piano. As the days go by, I get used to waking up in the Wild West.

When my doctor first suggested electroconvulsive therapy, I thought that it sounded scary. And it kind of is scary. They knock me out, put me into convulsions on purpose and then wake me up and send me on my way. It probably sounds like some kind of old-fashioned exorcism, where they're trying to cast the demon out of you. But, do you know what? It's working. My depression is lifting. I don't hear voices of the Black Clan plotting against me anymore. Well, that's not quite true. I still hear voices sometimes, but they're not as distinct. And now I know they're not real.

One of my TV buddies tells me he is going home today. I reach into my closet for a jacket so that I can walk him out. I feel a little sad and a

little lost. Then, my eyes are caught by my old, black boots in the bottom of the closet and I chuckle. I remember arriving in those boots, terrified of everybody and everything.

I couldn't have imagined, then, that the odd cast of characters here, with their outbursts and idiosyncrasies, could become my fellow travelers on this unmappable path to health. Or that the staff, with their rules and name tags, would become my confidants and protectors. Before I came here, I might have imagined that a locked ward such as this would be some sort of nightmare, but it is a place of comfort now.

I feel my sense of humour coming back. I feel my future coming back.

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