First Person Account: The Clogs

by Eric Sundstrom

The article that follows is part of the Schizophrenia Bulletin's ongoing First Person Account series. We hope that mental health professionals—the Bulletin's primary audience—will take this opportunity to learn about the issues and difficulties confronted by consumers of mental health care. In addition, we hope that these accounts will give patients and families a better sense of not being alone in confronting the problems that can be anticipated by persons with serious emotional difficulties. We welcome other contributions from patients, ex-patients, or family members. Our major editorial requirement is that such contributions be clearly written and organized, and that a novel or unique aspect of schizophrenia be described, with special emphasis on points that will be important for professionals. Clinicians who see articulate patients with experiences they believe should be shared might encourage these patients to submit their articles to Schizophrenia Bulletin, First Person Accounts, EEI Communications, 66 Canal Center Plaza, Suite 200, Alexandria, VA 22314.—The Editors.

The clogs are small and unassuming, covered with "I'll miss you" messages and short rhymes like "Don't kiss behind the garden gate; love may be blind but the neighbor's ain't." Few of the signatures hold any meaning for me, and to my sister the memories behind these inside jokes have mostly faded away or been warped by her delusions. When I first saw the clogs a few years ago, I had little recollection of who my sister was. Schizophrenia had altered her mind to the point that I had almost forgotten about the older sister who had helped bring me up. That small set of clogs is now a painfully touching memorial to the girl who was once so similar to myself. Before I found them, I had almost forgotten who she was.

My family spent 3 years in Holland while my sister was in middle school. I think she was truly happy then, forming friendships and teaching me about the things she loved. It seems incredible that she was once an ordinary girl, full of vibrant personality. I still remember how she taught me to read, using a now-ancient copy of The Cat in the Hat. When our family returned to America, all of her friends signed the clogs for her to remember them by. The clogs and a few memories are my only window into who she was then and who she should be now.

The years after we returned home marked the beginning of Juli's symptoms. She had trouble adjusting to high school from the start. During her sophomore year, her grades started to slide. Then came the delusions. I first noticed something was very wrong when, out of the blue, she accused us of taking a ski trip without her. We all assumed it was a temporary problem. Then one night while my parents were away, Juli threw a terrible fit. She began screaming and breaking anything she could, covering the entire floor in broken shards. My brother and I could only watch in horror from the upstairs balcony, wondering what had happened to our sister. That was when I realized how serious her illness was.

She experiences constant auditory hallucinations that have not responded to any known treatment, ranging from medication to therapy to electroshock. Occasionally, she repeats aloud what her hallucinations say to her, screaming out insults in horribly contorted voices. I find it hard to endure listening to these voices for minutes. She endures them constantly. She screams at them every day and is capable of carrying on only short conversations before she lapses back into hallucinations. These voices cause her to act out in other ways, ranging from the bizarre to the violent, and yet she still graduated with honors from a local college last spring. My sister taught me to never take my mind for granted.

Sometimes it is impossible to tell where the disease ends and my sister begins. When a disease infects the mind, the person and the disease become almost one. How can I hate the disease without hating my sister along with it, when the two are almost inseparable? How can I love my sister as she is taken away for spitting at my mother and punching my father?

A few months ago, my sister's medicines were changed unsuccessfully. The result was a full month of
her breaking glasses, mirrors, and anything else that was on hand when her voices made her break something. We told her that one more outburst would send her to the hospital. When that outburst came, we had no choice but to tell her to pack her bags. She responded by screaming threats and breaking two huge vases full of flowers, sending shards of glass flying through the air. I held her back as she spit, kicked, and cursed until she finally calmed down and consented to go to the mental hospital.

The house seemed strangely quiet as my brother and I cleaned up the shards of glass and pools of water, pausing to pick up what was left of the flowers. Afterward, we ate dinner in grave silence. We had realized that, just before her fit, my sister had baked us a quiche, with one side filled with vegetables and one side plain, for me. The girl with the clogs is the same girl who cooked us dinner; she is the same girl who fought her way through college. That is who my sister is, and that is why I can love her now more than ever.