

## UVic Diversity Writing Contest 2012, Second-Place Fiction Winner

By Brian Coleman

### 8 Down and Out

He hated standing in crowds. The endless waves of people crashing into each other as they carried out their daily tasks. The faceless figures rushing by one another, stuck in their own little words. People incapable of acknowledging anything but the task at hand. Why had she asked him to meet in the park? She knew he hated parks.

“You goddamn freak!”

He whipped his head around, trying to match a face to the voice. Of course there wasn't one. There never was one. Jack had gone through this so many times before. He should be used to the voices by now, but every once in a while they still caught him off guard. They always seemed so real. Where was she?

“She isn't coming. Why would she want to see you?”

His eyes scanned the landscape. The noon sun was high in the sky, although the winter's cold froze his breath where it stood. An elderly lady sat on a nearby bench feeding the few pigeons who braved the cold. A young mother pushed her son on a nearby swing set. Crowds of people continued to stream through the narrow pathways, the constant shuffle of their feet unable to drown out the whispers in his head.

“No one even knows you are here.”

The diagnosis came when Jack was 16 years old. His parents could dismiss some of his symptoms as childish fantasy and imaginary friends for a while, but in his teenage years he began to have more and more hallucinations. His speech grew more convoluted and non-sensical, his thoughts jumbled inside his own head. His parents got worried and they had him tested. Schizophrenia the doc had called it. They put him on pills and sent him back into the world. Risperdal, Zyprexa, Seroquel, hell he'd been on all of them at one point or another.

“Should have giving you the shock treatment. Fry your fucking brain.”

He'd met Sarah in his final year of high school. At that point Jack had kept the diagnosis secret, but his symptoms often led to strange looks and exclusion from the other students. She had just moved in from a nearby town and for one reason or another they had struck up a friendship. They both enjoyed doing the crossword and worked together on them during their lunch period. He didn't know what to make of it at first, but over time Jack began looking forward to seeing her at lunch every day. When high school was over, she'd gone off to a college in Chicago, while he'd remained behind. The next few years he'd worked a job or two, but wasn't able to hold one down as his symptoms grew worse and worse. His thoughts became more and more jumbled, he found it harder and harder to sleep, and the voices circled him like a vulture waiting for its prey to succumb. Sarah would call every once in a while to say hi and they would ask each other about a crossword clue they couldn't figure out. He always found her voice soothing because he knew that she was real. While his head was always swirling with disembodied sounds and taunts, she was his path back to reality, like a lighthouse in a fog.

“Too bad she's not coming.”

Jack gave his head a shake and looked down at his watch. 11:55. Sarah had told him to meet her at this park at noon, so she wasn't late yet. As he counted the seconds along with the timepiece, his eyes fell to the scars that adorned his arm. He'd made sure to buy a large watch in order to avoid the

stares of onlookers, but he knew never forgot they were there. The voices had gotten progressively worse, to the point where he could stand in an empty room and not hear himself speak. His first attempt ended up with him in a hospital, his mother in hysterics. The doctors patched him up and shipped him off to the local shrink. A new round of meds and some therapy sessions were the order of the day, but the effects were minimal. He became more withdrawn, his insomnia reaching lengthier stretches. One particularly bad bout led him to try again, yet he was interrupted by the ringing phone. Sarah was stuck on a particularly difficult puzzle. 8 down, "the writing on the wall?", starts with a G? They spent the rest of the night going over the rest of the problems and chatting like they were back in high school. His previous plans forgotten, he rolled into bed and slept peacefully.

"Should have finished the job."

He shivered in the cold air, the sun continuing its deception of warmth and comfort. The crowds continued to ebb and flow through the park, hardly noticing the young man seated at the table. The pigeons, having had their fill, were now nestled in the trees above. The young boy was now throwing snowballs at the other children as his mother began conversing with the other parents. Jack really hoped Sarah would get here soon. She had said she'd be in town for a few days and really wanted to see him. He even had a copy of today's paper ready so they could do the crossword. He really wanted to see her. Ever since that night, he had called her whenever he was having a bad week and her voice was enough to calm him down. Over time he had even made a few other friends, so when she wasn't available he could talk with them. He knew his condition would never really go away, but the idea that he could talk to her and see her again was enough to keep him going. That there were people out there that could cut through the voices; that he could anchor to in the crowd. They made his life just a little bit easier. Now all he wanted was to see her again.

"She's not going to show up this time."

"Can't believe you are wasting your time."

"She probably finally came to her senses."

"Why would anyone want to hang out with a freak like you?"

"Oh my God, Jack! I haven't seen you in forever!"

His head jerked up. He knew that voice. He knew that voice anywhere. She was standing there next to the table, the midday sun glowing behind her. And just like that, Jack wasn't in the crowd anymore.