

Paper Dolls

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A light here required a shadow there.

—Virginia Woolf

Along with threads of cotton, lengths of garden jute twine, my mother's brown hair that fell out in soft, abandoned clumps after the radiation and chemotherapy treatment—the paper dolls were cut with the blunt edge of the tarnished silver scissors. The scissors lived in the darkness of the kitchen drawer, the one above the pitch black cupboard where my mother hid the alcohol.

When I asked for the scissors, my mother took them out of the drawer and placed them on the edge of the kitchen table. At this point of my childhood, when I'm around seven or eight, my mother has mostly stopped speaking to me. She inhabits a grainy darkness, a place I cannot reach. By virtue of the small blue pills, and the dark bottles in the cupboard, she has faded away. She has somehow mastered the enigmatic skill of seeming present yet remaining entirely absent.

The cupboard in the kitchen smelled of the stale beer my mother had spilled, vinegar-like and mixed with oak. The alcohol has seeped into the wooden cupboard, becoming one with it. My mother doesn't hide in the cupboard, she just hides the alcohol there. The alcohol is used to hide her life. She hides herself so well she disappears.

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Holding a small vestige of my own tentative light, I enter my own cupboard of childhood, a dark protective geometry that shelters me from the storm of my parents arguing. It's the place under the stairs in the living room where no one ever finds me. Inside the cupboard, there are paper-filled boxes that are good for perching on when the fights between my mother and father

get bad, when the heavy objects get flung around, airborne for a moment. I hide myself so well I disappear.

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When I made the dolls, much was lost from mind to paper and more through the simple act of reproduction. Once created, I imagined the chain of paper dolls would dance together in a soft iridescent flickering light. I pictured their perfect and intricately detailed silhouettes as moving shadows reflected across the empty white walls. The outlines and edges of their dresses were carefully defined: puffy sleeves and tiny cinched waists, cascading layers of flowing skirts. I hoped that my paper dolls would be perfect; I hoped that they would be my escape from the childhood house.

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Chains of paper dolls can be traced back to the 19th century, with some of the earliest diagrams found in a book called The Girl's Own Toymaker, first published in 1860 in London. The book, written by two sisters, E. and A. Bradbury, contained instructions and diagrams for drawing the dolls, with the intention of encouraging young girls to be more creative and independent, able to develop skills such as problem solving and spatial reasoning. To create the two-dimensional doll, one would need their own sheet of writing paper, folded neatly into a concertina.

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My mother was an artist when she was younger, although in my childhood she hardly ever drew anything. Standing at the window in the kitchen, she rested her face on her hands, watching the wild birds outside in the garden: crows and rooks, jackdaws and jays. One day, I asked my mother to draw a picture of Cinderella for me. She took the small square of paper I handed to her and began sketching a princess with a soft pencil. For a few minutes, she was lost in the drawing; every line she drew seemed to breathe life into the character. As I watched her, I was amazed by her artistic talent, how she had captured Cinderella's essence in her drawing, making her come alive on the page. When she finished, she handed me the drawing with a blank look on her face.

What had momentarily animated my mother was gone; she went back to staring out of the window. She returned to her dimensionless fugue.

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I often believed I could make many more paper dolls than was in fact possible. I imagined twirling figures in infinite chains, in imagined cathedral spaces, dancing in harmony. The dolls would hold hands. Their reflections, embodying both light and shadow, would dance in a perfect glimmery light. Vast armies of paper dolls would form a vigilant circle around me, protecting me from the imminent danger of my mother's temper, the tornado that makes me run to find a hiding place. The tornado is the other side of the silent mercurial nothingness that defines my mother during the daytime.

I created the paper dolls in the kitchen at home, sitting at the far end of the white wooden table, near the birdcage. The cage contained the small, green bird I had brought home from school. I'd set up a workshop there, amongst the scraps and snippets of paper that accumulated around me like confetti.

The prototype, the first doll, always turned out to be a false promise. Although I tried to draw her outline as the one I had envisioned, upon the carefully folded piece of paper, the result was often disappointing, paling in comparison to the one in my mind, the one like my mother had drawn for me. When it came to the cutting part, arms and legs were often shortened, hands were sometimes severed in a passing lapse of my concentration. When this happened, usually because I was vigilantly counting the number of times my mother went to the kitchen cupboard, the paper dolls did not hold hands. Instead, they were held together precariously, by the corners of their plain triangle dresses, suspended in a dangly awkwardness. Their attachment to each other was flimsy at best and they could easily be ripped apart. When I tried to stand them up on the table, they toppled toward each other in a disenchanting lopsided state of uncertainty. The paper dolls were just too fragile.

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My mother's doctor had prescribed the blue pills on and off throughout her marriage to my father. I remember my father's fury about it.

"He's not a doctor! He's your bloody confidant!" he'd shout when she came home with the paper bag that contained the bottle of pills. My father didn't appreciate the idea of my mother speaking about the state of their marriage. But the pills provided her with an alternate escape route, besides the alcohol, from the late-stage diagnosis, the cancer that had metastasized from its original location in her breast to other parts of her body. The cancer had spread and was hard to treat. It was impossible to completely cut away. So the pills tranquilized her mind and gave her a room with soft glimmery light. As promised, they flattened out the peaks and valleys of her mercurial moods.

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Developed as an alternative to barbiturates, themselves considered highly addictive, Valium was first synthesized in 1959 at Hoffmann-La Roche, a Swiss Pharmaceutical company. Valium was seen as a safe alternative in the treatment of anxiety. In the UK, by 1965, it was the most commonly prescribed drug for anxiety and other nervous conditions. By the 1970s, it was the most widely prescribed drug in the world.

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The excitement would inevitably wane once I had created the dolls, cut with the blunt scissors. In truth, I quickly grew tired of them as my mother had grown tired of me and my sisters, turning instead to all forms of available numbness to escape the drudgery and noise of motherhood. It was too much to ask for me to color them all, one after the next. Therefore, I colored each subsequent doll with waning interest, so each one was plainer than the last. Only the first one was colored carefully, with my full concentration, endowed with the virtues of beauty I could consider at the age of seven: yellow hair, green eyes, long eyelashes, red lips. I see it now—the dolls were tiny replicas of my young mother.

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Sometimes, when my mother mixed the pills with alcohol, in the course of an evening spent alone while my father was out with other women, she would lose control and collapse onto the floor. My sister would wake me up, and together we would try to help our mother regain her senses.

“We have to move Mummy!” she’d whisper into my dark childhood sleep.

We would tiptoe downstairs, through the hallway, to where we would find our mother lying flat on the floor. Knowing it would be too hard to wake her, we carried our small crumpled mother back to her bed. With my sister carrying her hands and me the feet, my mother was limp like a doll.

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When it was time for dinner, when the windows had fogged from the condensation of the boiled dinner, reaching full opacity, the dolls were lost in the tidying that accompanied the onset of the evening meal. They were lost in the flurry and the dread of my father’s return to the house. When my mother tidied up, the dolls were put away in anger, with stacks of old newspapers, with the cluttered piles of unopened letters. The anger was meant for my father, for his affairs and the collapse of the marriage, but it was directed at me and the dolls instead.

In the last few years of her life, my mother rejected being fully alive in favor of deepening her connection to nothingness. She walked into the fugue, collapsing into its soft dimensionless void. The blue pills had diminished her agency as well as her capacity to make choices; they nullified her capacity to act independently and be present in the world. Like the paper dolls, she had become light to hold, easy to crumple. And so, before she died, when I was thirteen, my mother’s world became smaller. She wore the pale blue, threadbare hospital gown; she was surrounded by the blue screen in the hospital ward. At the center of it was the refillable bottle of pills. The doctor could not write a prescription for her loneliness.

In the bedroom at home where she died, shut down and dead to the world, my mother lay motionless on the bed.

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The paper dolls evoke my past and present selves, reflecting the various iterations and transformations that have taken place over time. I imagine the exiled parts of me as long ago abandoned paper dolls, misplaced in the shuffling tidying up of time, lost in the anger and the dread, buried in the chaos and the addiction, tucked away in the grief. I think about creating new paper dolls, at my wooden writing table in the house where I live now, to acknowledge the lost and scared parts of me that are hidden inside. I simply want them to know that I see them, embodying the light and the shadow; I see that childhood was deeply frightening for them.

The first and smallest doll wears the National Health Service glasses with blue plastic frames. My mother has cut my white blonde hair bluntly with the tarnished scissors. The corners of my mother's mouth turn up when I tell her that the haircut has made the other girls laugh at me at school. The second doll is just as lacking in confidence as the first, with flowers haphazardly tucked into her unkempt hair. If she were a real child, her neglect would be immediately apparent, reported to the appropriate authorities to ensure that children growing up in abusive and neglectful environments receive the care and support they need.

When not made of paper, the youngest exiled versions of me spend most of their time in hiding, seeking refuge in gardens or perched on a box filled with paper inside a cupboard beneath the stairs; they know exactly what to do when the tornado warning is sounded, when their mother drinks too much, when the empty pill bottle rolls under the bed.

The third doll has black circles under her eyes—she is a motherless child. She is quiet and mostly averts her expression to avoid both contact and connection. She is ever vigilant.

As I imagine the dolls, I see the ways in which they are going to stand in line, holding hands; I see their protective allegiance to each other. I see the vigilance. I realize there is an infinite number of them, standing in the light and the shadow. I realize that I carry them inside me. Just like the paper dolls, much is lost from mind to paper.