

Down the Rabbit Hole

The Mad Hatter saved my life. You think I'm joking?

It was March 2010: My career wasn't working, and neither was I. My immediate family was falling apart--again--and I was slowly climbing out of a deep depression. Luckily, I was a member of the Actors Work Program, an organization that helped people in the entertainment industry unions find gainful employment outside the industry. This pursuit involved going to job fairs, recreating one's resume, etc. The only problem was that with a PhD topping my resume, I was always "overqualified" for everything outside academe and "underqualified" for everything inside academe.

At a networking event, I made the acquaintance of. . . let's call her "P", who shared my interests in music, German, and women's history. One cloudy day, P and I attended a job fair for a cruise ship company. Nothing to float my boat when all was said and done, but afterwards P and I had lunch. She was a member of the Screen Actors Guild, and she had passes to a screening of the newly-opened Tim Burton film, *Alice in Wonderland*. Would I like to go? Honestly, I wasn't sure. After years of struggling to support myself in my native New York City as a juggler, dancer, operatic soloist and sometime academic, I had nearly given up on movies, on magic . . . on dreams.

I was on my way home, so I told P that I'd walk her to the Director's Guild Cinema, since it was on my way to the subway. Once we got to the theater, I tried to think of a good reason not to go in. "My mother is expecting me for dinner," was the best I could do, which really did not seem to be a proper excuse. So I went into the theater . . . "Just to use the bathroom."

Out of the bathroom, with five minutes to show time, P says, "Are you sure you don't want to stay?"

I take out my flip phone and call home.

"Hi Mom. I won't be in for dinner. . . You've already eaten? OK. Great!. . . Yeah. I'll eat when I get in. Thanks!"

Now, I'd never read Lewis Carroll's "Alice" stories. I only knew one work of his, the poem, "Jabberwocky". It had been my favorite in Victorian Literature class.

The only thing in this film's favor, as far as I was concerned, was that it was in 3D. Heck, even if I didn't like it, I reasoned, it would be worth the price of admission to see my first 3D film!

We sat in one of the front rows, extreme right. The lights went down, the music and images came up. . .

April Lynn James
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And I was hooked from the first moment! Transfixed! There was magic, innocence, mystery and wonder in the music and in the shimmering visuals. As I drank it all in, I saw my life reflected in those characters and situations.

There was the relationship between young Alice and her father, dreamers who understand one another.

The relationship between teenaged Alice and her mother--distant, with the mother always trying to get Alice to conform to some societally acceptable standard of proper femininity. She and Alice's older sibling have arranged an engagement party for Alice without Alice's knowledge, during which Alice's dreams are called "impossible".

The white rabbit "in a waistcoat" that she's seen in her dreams for years appears, and Alice . . . well, she's gotta go! She follows the rabbit to--and then down--the rabbit hole.

In this half-remembered world that has haunted her dreams, she encounters a hookah-smoking Blue Caterpillar who asks her, "Who are you?" She thinks she can answer, but can she? Is she the right Alice?

The Cheshire Cat leads her to a clearing where several tables have been put together to make one long table that is set for a great many people, but at which there are only three to be seen: a Hare, a Dormouse and. . .

There's a close-up of the Hatter, asleep in a chair. He awakens. As his head comes up, he sees Alice approaching from the clearing, and his face fills with delight. And I--at the moment his face fills the screen--I hear this British-accented voice whisper in my head, clear as day:

"That's me!"

Inside my head, I ask, "Me who?" No reply.

When I emerged from the theater two hours later, it was as if some low-simmering flame within had been sparked back into life. Once I'd finished my PhD, I thought I was done with obsessions, but here I was, obsessed with the Hatter. Everywhere I went, I saw his image. The day I found the Disney Store online, all was lost! I bought books, recordings, posters, tote bags, filling my room with his image. Of course I bought the DVD as soon as it came out--I watched it every Saturday evening for over a year.

My wardrobe which, I'll admit, had stagnated to somewhere between Dull and Normal, took on a new vibrancy as I mixed colors and patterns in whimsical ways. Then, in June 2011, I was on the computer seeking to download stills from the film to use as wallpaper on my Mac. On some fan site, I found a beautiful wallpaper with the Hatter's picture and a poem written in a Hatter-ish voice.

Not bad, I thought. And then that British-accented voice piped up in my head again quietly, politely, almost shyly:

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“I could do better...”

“What do you mean?” I ask aloud.

Inside, the response, “Well look, it’s not even in a proper form. It needs to be a sonnet!”

“A sonnet? But I haven’t written one of those since my first undergraduate degree!”

Again, no reply.

Well, being a creative person who has had encounters of the inspirational kind before, I know a directive from Spirit when I hear it. So I went with this suggestion, but first, I looked up the definition of “sonnet” in my copy of the *Oxford American Dictionary*, just to make certain I was remembering things correctly. Its definition of “sonnet”: 14 line poem. Got it!

I took out a pen and some paper. I began writing, and then laughing as, 15 minutes later, we had:

If I were not mad, what on earth would I be?
‘Tis an unlikely prospect, I’m sure you’ll agree.
Those voices that whisper when no one is near--
their meaning is all too entirely clear.
I laugh out of turn and sing in the rain;
To me, this is custom, to others, insane.
My past is a mystery shrouded in dreams,
concealed by blue starlight, and moonlit by streams.
My present meanders up uncommon roads,
and as for my future, who knows what it holds?
My friends? They’re a mixture of whimsy and wise
who come round the bend to drink tea in disguise.
In a world where $1 + 1 = 3$,
If I were not mad, well then, who would I be?

Who indeed? The voice was familiar, like a long-lost friend. The name and profession, “Madison Hatta, Sonneteer,” came out of my pen immediately after the poem, and all I could do was wonder and giggle with amazement.