



Electroboy

He was hooked up, switched on, blissed out.

I'm lying on a gurney in the operating room at Gracie Square Hospital. I feel as if I'm waiting for either the scariest roller-coaster ride of my life or for my own execution. I'm convinced that if I live, my brain will be reduced to a blank Rolodex. I look down at my bare feet. A flawless loafer tan line. Maybe I'll die wearing flesh-tone loafers.

As far as manic-depressive tales go, my stories are typical. My illness went undiagnosed for a decade, a period of euphoric highs and desperate lows highlighted by \$25,000 shopping sprees, impetuous trips to Tokyo, Paris and Milan, drug and alcohol binges, days without sleep, sex with strangers and jail time. After seeing eight psychiatrists, I finally received a diagnosis of bipolar disorder on my 32d birthday. Over the next year and a half, I was treated unsuccessfully with more than 30 medications. My suburban New Jersey upbringing, my achievements as a film major at Wesleyan and a thriving career in public relations couldn't help me.

April 11, 1995. I'm in front of Barneys when it finally happens. My skin starts tingling and I feel as if my insides are spilling onto the sidewalk. Everything moves in slow motion. I can't hear. I rush home and climb into the empty bathtub. I lie still for hours. As a last resort, I'm admitted to the hospital for ECT, electroconvulsive therapy, more commonly known as electroshock. The doctor explains the procedure to me. But most important, he tells me that I will get better.

Seven A.M. The doctor and his team, as well as a group of residents, hover over me. Standing room only. I'm about to have my brains jolted with 200 volts of electricity while 10 note-taking spectators gawk. I'm thinking about being struck by lightning and the electric chair. I'm joking incessantly to fend off the terror. Is it too late for the call from the Governor? No call. The show must go on.

"Got an Amstel Light?" I ask. No response. I give the thumbs up. An IV of Brevital, an anesthetic, is stuck into my arm, silencing me. I struggle to stay awake — a losing battle. But I've been told what will happen: an IV of succinylcholine goes in next, relaxing my muscles to prevent broken bones and cracked vertebrae. The nurse sticks a rubber block in my mouth so I don't bite off my tongue, a mask over my mouth and nose so my brain is not deprived of oxygen, and elec-

trodes on my temples. All clear. The doctor presses a button. Electric current shoots through my brain for an instant, causing a grand-mal seizure for 20 seconds. My toes curl. It's over. My brain has been "reset" like a windup toy.

I wake up 30 minutes later and think I'm in a hotel room in Acapulco. My head feels as if I've just downed a frozen margarita too quickly. My jaw and limbs ache. But I feel elated. "Come, Electroboy," says the nurse in a thick Jamaican accent. I take a sip of juice as she grabs my arm and escorts me downstairs, where my father is waiting with my best friend, a turkey sandwich and a Diet Coke. I ask questions. Do I have a job? No. An apartment? Yes. A dog? No. When I get home, I reacquaint myself with my apartment. I'm not really sure it's mine. It feels as if I've been away for years. After a nap, I shower, get dressed and hail a cab. By 8 P.M., I'm at a restaurant downtown, deliberating between the salmon and the veal.

After four treatments, there is marked improvement. No more egregious highs or lows. But there are huge gaps in my memory. I avoid friends and neighbors because I don't know their names anymore. I can't remember the books I've read or the movies I've seen. I have trouble recalling simple vocabulary. I forget phone numbers. Sometimes I even forget what floor I live on. It's embarrassing. But I continue treatment because I'm getting better.

And I actually start to love ECT. I have 19 treatments over the course of a year. I look forward to them. It's like receiving a blessing in a sanctuary. I rearrange my treatment schedule so that one falls on my birthday. I start believing that electric current purifies me. I become addicted to the rituals — fasting the night before, driving across Central Park to the hospital in the early morning, connecting to the machines that monitor my vital signs, closing my eyes and counting backward. It's an oddly religious experience. It's my meditation, my yoga, my tai chi.

On the one-year anniversary of my first electroshock treatment, I'm clearheaded and even-keeled. I call my doctor to announce my "new and improved" status and ask to be excused from ECT that week. He agrees to suspend treatment temporarily. Surprisingly, I'm disappointed. ECT reassures me. Soon I miss the hospital and my "maintenance" regimen. But I never see the doctor again. Two and a half years later, I still miss ECT. But medication keeps my illness in check, and I'm more sane than I've ever been. If I could only remember the capital of Chile. ■

Andy Behrman is writing a book about his manic depression.

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ELECTROBOY PLUGS IN: An 820-word piece for *The New York Times Magazine* turned into \$450,000—and counting—for one lucky writer. ICM agent **Suzanne Gluck** was able to sell Random House, three foreign publishers (to date), and HBO on a memoir by **Andy Behrman** based on "Electroboy," the story of his electroshock treatments for manic-depression. In the eighties, Behrman was the peripatetic publicist behind that one-man artistic employment agency **Mark**

Kostabi; in the nineties, the increasingly erratic promoter went to prison for selling fake Kostabis to unwitting Japanese collectors. Behrman, who was in and out of the hospital eighteen times in 1995, is enthusiastic about his latest project. "Anyone who loves drugs, sex, and crime will love this book," he says confidently.

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