

## THE SHOCKING TRUTH

(For Susan)

*Dorothy Washburn Dundas*

I can still feel the cold, sticky linoleum beneath my bare feet as I shuffled my way to the bathroom on those freezing early mornings during the winter of 1960. The sensations and memories are as much a part of me now as they were then, perhaps even more vivid now, as I realize the shocking brutality of my treatment as an adolescent girl locked into a mental institution because of my overwhelming feelings of depression.

We were lined up side by side in our beds on those mornings, four girls, huddled beneath our cold, white sheets, petrified and silent. I can see the nurse in her starched white uniform. I can smell the alcohol she rubbed on my bottom, and I can feel the sting of the sharp needle as she injected the insulin into me: insulin coma therapy, five days a week for six weeks.

After we were groggy from the insulin, but often not yet in a coma, the second treatment would begin. I can still see him walking through the door to our bare hospital-green room, his face, gray-white in color, and his black suit and black shoes. He carried all his equipment in a small black suitcase in one hand, this man of death and destruction. He set up his machine behind our heads, one by one. Curled up beneath our sheets, heads covered, as though seeking womb-like protection, we were, as they peeled the sheets off us, one by one, forcing us onto our backs, bare and open and vulnerable. I was second in the line-up.

Before being turned, I would often peek out from a small, secret opening in my sheet to see what they were doing to Susan, the first to receive the treatment. I would make myself watch as if it might prepare me in some way. And when she would shake

violently all over, my eyes would close. I could no longer watch. I would shiver beneath my sheet in fear. And then they would come to me. I can still feel the sticky, cold jelly they put on my temples. My arms and legs were held down. Each time, I expected I would die. I did not feel the current running through me. I did wake up with a violent headache and nausea every time. My mind was blurred. And I permanently lost eight months of my memory for events preceding the shock treatments. I also lost my self-esteem. I had been beaten down.

But I was lucky. I was very, very lucky. On one of those cold winter mornings exactly thirty years ago, they injected my friend, Susan, in the bed next to me, with more insulin than her frail young body could tolerate. A few hours later, as the four of us were having our mandatory afternoon nap, still huddled beneath our sheets, my friend Susan went to sleep and never woke up. She had just turned seventeen. When she died, she became a part of me.

On the winter afternoons after Susan died, I can remember my "mental health care" continued by my being taken into that same shock room, where we also slept at night, by a mental health worker. He would lock the door, push me up against the wall, and sexually abuse me. My head foggy from the insulin, dazed from the drugs, I was petrified. I did not scream. I did not dare. I survived. And I did not tell anyone for a long, long time.



After six months, I was transferred to another institution. What I recall most vividly from that institution is the seclusion. The room was dark and hot and sticky. It was bare except for the roughly covered, striped mattress. There was no sheet. I could feel every thread in the fabric against my skin as if I were being cut into pieces with my every move. And inside, the pain was rushing through my head and every vein. I could feel the Thorazine sting as they injected the needle into my skin, and I would then become a stranger to myself, dead and dying from the inside out. It went on for weeks and weeks and weeks. I was crying for Susan, for my shattered self, for my lost freedom. I was trying to survive. The seclusion did not help. And the drugs nearly killed me.

One woman I shall always remember for her fearless rage. In her fifties, she wore her graying black hair pulled tightly back in a bun, and she always wore the same long, dark, straight dress

and black shoes with thick high heels. Her fury was something to behold. The only times I saw this amazing woman were when she would emerge from her room, three times a day, tray in hand, and smash the entire tray with all the food spraying upside-down across the floor outside her door, screaming that she did not want to be locked up and she would not eat the food until they let her go free. Her shrieks were piercing, sometimes even frightening; but I always held her in very high esteem because of her bravery and her ability to yell out the truth before all of us who were much younger and much more afraid.

During the three years I spent in institutions, I saw and experienced a lot of abuse. Some of it was violent, some of it was more subtle, but it was almost always present in one form or another, like a polluted river running through our lives. We did the best we could to survive. Many of us did not. We were all thought of as crazy when, in fact, we were trying desperately to adapt to a societally sanctioned form of control under the guise of "mental health care." Most of us were in a war, not only a war within ourselves, but also a war against the system that had put us there. And it was not a war we could ever win. We tried and tried and tried.



I learned a lot from my experiences. One thing I learned was never to remain silent in the face of abuse. I also learned that the least restrictive, personal, and compassionate care most often leads to healing. After I was released from the last institution, I was fortunate finally to find that rare and healing kind of care, which enabled me, in spite of my experiences, to rebuild my life.

Recently, I attended a hearing before Judge Rya Zobel in U.S. District Court where I heard horrifying stories of neglect, overuse of restraint, medication, and seclusion.\* A nurse told of elderly women tied to their beds for hours on end because there

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\* *McNamara vs. Dukakis*. Relatives and friends of Massachusetts' nearly 5,000 mental patients filed suit seeking restoration of funding that was reduced through budget cuts ordered by Governor Michael Dukakis. According to the suit, the cuts "expose many patients to risk of serious physical harm, unnecessary restraint, and hospitalization."

were not enough nurses to care for them properly. I remember women such as those she described. Sitting in that courtroom, as I heard the witnesses testifying on behalf of the patients, the pictures in my mind from thirty years ago became clear, Technicolor crisp, with intricate detail: The old women were lined up and tied to their chairs from 6 a.m. until 8 p.m. They mumbled in the hall next to each other. Sometimes they wailed and pleaded to be let out. They wore diapers, and their urine often spilled out onto the floor. I tried to soothe them; they were inconsolable. They were the women who had been abused in their youth; many had been shocked, overmedicated, secluded for years. They were the women who never made it out. They were a constant reminder of what could happen to all of us who were so much younger. They were the old women of thirty years ago, now dead. The old women of today are still tied to their beds. In many, many cases, their "illnesses" have been caused by the atrocities within the system over the years. I saw it happen.

It is important to know that the worst atrocities happened to me in the prettiest places. One looked like a farmhouse from the front, with lots of flowers and trees. Way back in the woods, there was a small concrete unit where the shock patients were housed. That was where I spent most of my time. The other pretty hospital looked like a college campus. At least no one pretended that the state hospitals looked like a college campus. At least no one pretended that the state hospitals were pleasant. They looked horrible, and they were horrible. The "nice" places were an illusion where more drugging and sexual and physical abuse happened to me than anywhere else.

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