

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/3

Emily Jankura

### Electro Convulsive Therapy

If I am being perfectly honest; I don't remember all the details of my first Electro Convulsive Treatment. That is what happens with Electro Convulsive Therapy or ECT for short. The procedure takes away your memories before and after the procedure. You would think that is a good thing, but it is not always the case. I do not remember the month long stay in the hospital where I received treatments three times a week for a month. I am grateful for not remembering the stay, but I do remember the treatments.

For my first treatment, my parents came and waited with me in the dining room of the psych ward. We waited for the nurse to take me back to the treatment area. I am unsure of what is going to happen but I waited patiently. ECT is not a fun thing to be waiting for. I am sitting in my hospital gown and wearing the ugliest blue plastic pants, waiting for them to start. I want this to be over with. I am not scared per se, but I am kind of nervous. I have been waiting for a long time.



I have been severely depressed for fifteen years. I have suffered multiple bouts of depression over the years. I tried medication and other treatment, like TMS or Transcranial Magnetic Stimulus. Big news, it did not work. Nothing could get rid of the deep depression that lay within me. I was considered "treatment resistant." My old psychiatrist once told me that there was nothing that she could do for me and that broke my heart. She sent me to a specialist in the city and he recommended ECT, which is considered a last resort in the psychiatric community.

After seeing the specialist, we waited for several months searching for a hospital that would take us. The specialist gave us several options like New Presbyterian and NYU. After a while we got a call from Columbia University Medical Center. They had an opening and we took it. After seeing multiple doctors and deciding this was the right treatment for me, we waited for bed on the unit to start the treatments. I would have to stay a month in the hospital and then switch to outpatient treatments after twelve treatment or something like that.

As I wait in my blue scrubs, the nurse comes back into the room and tells me they are ready. I left my parents in the other room and followed the nurse into the ECT suite. The ECT suite is a connection of small rooms: one waiting room, one recovery room and the room where they do the procedure. They told me to lie down on the stretcher while they put the heart monitor on my chest.

ECT has come a long way since *One Flew Out over the Cuckoo's Nest*. During that time period the movie takes place there were no sedatives and or muscle relaxers. The patient was awake and shook violently. Now I am completely asleep and are given muscle relaxers so you no longer seize like in the early days. An anesthesiologist, a psychiatrist, nurse and a resident are in the room during the procedure.

I have to sit up to sign a release form for the treatment while lying on

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/3

the stretcher. I don't know what it says, but I sign it anyway. They ask me to lie down again, and the anesthesiologist and the resident begin to look for a good vein. If you had good luck, you got a resident who knew how to find the right vein. If you had bad luck, you got one who did not know what they are doing at all. On that day, I am unlucky and the resident sticks me with multiple needles and still can't get a good vein. The anesthesiologist had to stick me, and he gets it on the first try. He wraps the IV in tape so I won't disrupt the IV when I move. I learn that if you put the IV bag under the IV site and it still flows, the needle made it into the vein.

The psychiatrist performing the procedure attaches electric wiring to my head. A monitoring system is attached with little sticky tape to my forehead to monitor the seizure. That's what you want in ECT, a seizure. I don't know the whole science behind it, but somehow it resets the brain. After that, jelly was put in my hair at the site where the instrument that delivers the electrical currents is set.

After that they do what they call "time out," which is an information-gathering series of questions. They ask for my name, *Emily Amanda Jankura*, my birthday, *11/13/1997*, and what procedure I am having. *Right side ECT*. There are both bilateral and unilateral ECT. They call unilateral ECT "right side ECT" in the hospital. At Columbia they only do right side ECT. Bilateral ECT causes more memory loss because electrodes are placed on both sides of the head. Most hospitals only do right side ECT because it is viewed as being just as effective as unilateral in treating depression, but with less memory loss and damage to the brain.

After the time out, the anesthesiologist gets to work. He gives me oxygen first in the form of a mask. It makes you feel as if you are choking. They get the medicines together that will put you to sleep and they make you count back from a hundred. As you count, they put the propofol in and you slowly drift off to sleep. The thing no one told me is that the medication hurts. I can feel a burning sensation going up my arm, starting at the IV site. I start crying when they put the medicine in. The nurse holds my hand and whispers to me that everything is going to be okay. I slowly slip away remembering nothing but the pain of the medication.



When I wake up, I am in the recovery room and I have the world's worst headache. They gave me pain medicine in my IV but it isn't helping. I am in so much pain. My whole-body aches and I don't know why. I sit in the recovery room for a half hour and the nurse feeds me juice and crackers. I am attached to oxygen to help after the anesthesia. It allows for the anesthesia to work better.



Over the next four weeks, I stay in the hospital and receive treatments and then after four weeks I was allowed to go home. They all warn you about the memory loss but nothing prepares you for bouts of absent time in space. There are things that I cannot recall. Days of blank space.

I was home for several months following the initial treatments and I watched this tv program from the seventies called *Soap*. I watched it all the time and had the whole series memorized. When I returned from

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/3

treatment, I had no recollection of the tv series at all. I couldn't remember anything about the show, much less how much I enjoyed it. The memories were gone. I can only remember the important parts from that time, like the procedure itself. That is the cruel nature of this procedure. I only remember the bad parts that stick with you.

The most frustrating about ECT is that you only reap the benefits for a short while. The depression goes away for a short while then it come back. It requires ongoing treatment and sometimes you can have a dozen treatments and it still will not make the darkness of the depression disappear. I reaped the benefits when I can and take the pain when necessary. I am forever grateful for ECT but it has just the same effect on me as the depression. What do you do? Do you take the consequences with the benefits? Is it worth it in the end?

That is what I want to know. Memories erased without a second glance. Is it necessary or is my depression so treatment resistant that even a miracle wouldn't cure it? Those are the questions that keep me up at night. Am I so broken that even a life-changing treatment like ECT won't always work?