

# 11 Years Later

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JENNIE DONOVAN

*Ily aura bientôt onze ans ce printemps, quand je fus admise à l'hôpital bourrée de médicaments et soumise aux électrochocs. J'avais dix-sept ans à l'époque, depuis, j'ai composé mon histoire à partir des bribes de souvenirs qui me sont restées en tête au cours de ces années jusqu'à maintenant.*

I need sleep. It has been months since I really slept. I wake up at school, at work, but I've not been sleeping. I wake from violence and gore, a woman with purple snakes under the skin on her neck that throb as she turns to show me empty eye sockets. I wake with the realization that the layers that form different stages of enlightenment are overcrowded and there's nowhere for me to go. The world is ending here and now without any space for billions of people to go next. So I am stuck here, awake.

The drugs they give me keep my eyes closed and make me a prisoner inside my own body. That's not what I need; I need to get out of here and away from artificial sleep. I can't believe people who love me leave me here. How do they know there's a difference between dreams and reality? How can they tell I can't comprehend

that difference? The only test they've done had multiple choice answers that didn't really apply to me. I need a cigarette, but they said there is no escort available to take me outside and watch me so I won't hurt myself.

I live in a ward separate from the rest of the hospital. I guess crazy people depress sick people? Sometimes one of the nurses will take us for a walk to the vending machines in the cafeteria. Some of the other people have more privileges, like they can go down and smoke in front of the hospital. They told me I'd probably be able to sometime, when my body adjusts to the meds and I don't feel so weak.

The beds here aren't built for comfort, but they are the one thing we don't have to share with someone else, so I spend a lot of time in mine. I pushed the dresser over so I can reach my drawers from bed. I keep candy in there that my friends bring me when they come to visit. I mostly want candy made out of marshmallow. My vision is always blurry, and my whole body shakes so I can't even read anymore. I wonder how the needles they poke us with can put us to sleep for eight hours but not stop the nightmares.

This is what I get for doing what I was supposed to do— tell someone how I felt. The “help” I'm getting is designed to keep my energy levels too low for the act of suicide, to keep my mind so clouded that I can't remember why I'm so dissatisfied with the world.

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It's been eleven years this spring.

I entered the hospital in the middle of a night in which I found myself torn between two families: the one I lived with and the one I visited in dreams who asked me to stay. My Mom drove me there and stayed with me in a “quiet room” until the psychiatrist arrived in the morning to admit me. I brought a book, a journal and pen, and cigarettes. I remember the process: get some stuff, drive to the hospital, wait, and hope that someone could stop me from being crushed by all the invisible walls closing in on me, forcing me to contort my body and become as small as possible. Hold my breath and believe I am invisible. September eleventh, the death of Ernie Coombs, and my repeated desperate attempts to get out of a frightening and oppressive relationship are three events that I know happened in the months before my hospitalization.

Being admitted to a psychiatric ward meant surrendering my rights and submitting my mind and body to medicine and people more powerful than me. I was stripped of my clothes and my identity no longer mattered. I was just another broken girl. I entered a bare room with a bed and a board that served as a table. The stark environment is a reminder that there are

construction.

I don't remember a lot about the hospital. Colours and smells (sterile gloves can still make me panic), a pool table, a woman who sang to me, cream of mushroom soup, fake stained glass I painted, the place we could smoke outside that was completely closed in by windows, pills, Scrabble that I couldn't play because spelling became

twist knowledge of horrors until they look like something more palatable. Treatment can undermine rebellion and kill passion.

Shock therapy. I had no idea what that was. My psychiatrist said that pills weren't working fast enough and electroconvulsive therapy was an effective treatment with few side effects. Memory loss was temporary.

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no other options left. Why else would I be here? At first, my few belongings were searched and held hostage, except when someone was available to observe me using them. I was in one of four rooms behind the nurses' station, separate from the rest of the ward. These rooms are designed to allow for easier surveillance of people who may be more likely to harm themselves, though everyone on the ward is closely monitored. In this concentrated care area, there was a rule about keeping the shared bathroom door open at all times for safety reasons, and it made me anxious. After a night or two, I was able to stay in a regular room, with a roommate and my own clothes and a bathroom in the room. My personal items were returned after being judged acceptable.

The hospital reinforced that I was different from other people. I liked when friends visited me, but was disturbed when I was allowed out on evening and weekend passes. My Mom has told me I used to make her take me back to the hospital early. I remember this happening one night after I yelled at a friend in a restaurant. It was completely out of character, but my personality was under (re)

too difficult. I recognize that it has been a while, but this is different than normal forgetting. It's the erasure of both really important and mundane things, including good things that I knew had happened when people brought them up later, but I could not conjure any images of the event in my mind. And it was gone all at once. More importantly, I no longer had any understanding of myself. I had to entirely rebuild a shattered system of values and beliefs. I never got to choose what I forgot, and I am still haunted by what remains.

This loss extended back over most of my high school years. I returned to finish my last semester before graduation with strangers who seemed to know me (and my story, thanks to the inappropriate actions of a faculty member who told students why I was missing from class). I blame the memory loss in part on drugs, but especially on shock therapy—prescribed while I was still too young to consent to treatment without my parents' permission—to treat my confused, hurt, developing brain. I'm sure my psychiatrist would blame depression or post-traumatic stress or some other word. Diagnoses can

He said something about electricity stimulating neurotransmitters, making them shoot out serotonin. That I would have a headache afterwards. I was in awe that my brain could withstand the application of electricity, and that induced seizures might be able to make it so my parents could stop worrying.

There are few images that I associate with the days around this treatment: lying on my bed as I am wheeled into a giant elevator, counting down from ten as that garlic taste from the anaesthesia rises in my throat. Afterwards, I am tired, sore and disoriented in a way I'd never known possible. My mind grasps at names of people with vaguely familiar faces that I am supposed to know. My lips are cracked, bloody, dehydrated and I have a sense that my jaw isn't moving properly.

I will never be able to satisfactorily articulate the terror of shock, but the knowledge that this experience is more traumatic than anything else I've encountered marks my body and soul. I relive the fear of shock. I am completely alone in my knowledge. I read stories by other survivors and cry because they understand, but they are so far and so untouchable. I appreciate how fast

everything I know can be destroyed if I fail to manage my emotions. I won't talk to mental health professionals about my problems any more.

An alarming number of people have told me that I am lucky to forget that time of my life. Some even see me as a successful outcome of the "mental health system." I'm sure my doctors do; I mean, I haven't been hospitalized again. I am enraged when I think that people give credit to the treatment that wrecked me for years. While medicated, the drugs kept me too doped up to get to work on time. Fortunately, the manager at my fast food job was an incredibly understanding and forgiving woman. When I got a second job, she would let me sleep, curled up on the grease-covered floor of the coat closet, in the hour before my evening shift. I guess this counts as success?

Going to university has been my lifelong goal. As a kid, I would snap wishbones while imagining a schol-

arship. I know that the main reason I am in school now is because I am lucky enough to be surrounded by so many compassionate people who loved me until I could do it myself. In hospital, I was told that I would be on medication for the rest of my life. I am not on medication. I was told that writing wasn't helping me get better, and that school would be hard for me.



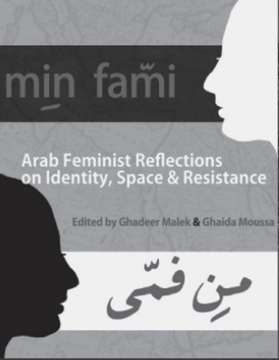

For the first few years outside of the hospital, I could retain very little information or form new memories. It was discouraging to not be able to tell people what happened in a book I had just finished reading, or what a movie was about. It was hard to establish new friendships since I introduced myself to people multiple times and forgot valuable conversations. When I finally began university, I was increasingly frustrated by how many times I would have to read the same sentence. I needed to develop new learning strat-

egies when previously I was able to acquire knowledge quickly. Frequent re-reading, extensive note-taking, a conscious effort to concentrate and improved listening skills have all helped me in my academic career.

When I was seventeen, what I needed most was a place to stay where I could safely extract myself from a dangerous situation and receive support to help me evaluate and clearly express my thoughts, and explain my behaviours that were interpreted as not normal. What if instead of infantilization, drugs and shock, I had experienced empathy, warmth, and validation?

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