

The Procedure

by Patrick Guttery

James's brain screamed from the scalding. The smell of burning flesh attacked his senses. *Water...thirsty*, was all he could think. James did not know where he was. The light hurt his eyes. Barely making out the ceiling, he searched frantically for some hint, some recognition.

"It is all over now. You rest," said the voice coming from somewhere behind him.

He became aware of the faint hum of a fan. He was wet. He had soiled himself. Voices murmured and echoed through the cold, cavernous room. A white-uniformed nurse wiped his face with cool water. He could not move. A rag stuffed into his mouth prohibited him from vocalizing his fear. His memory completely eliminated, frightened him.

The gurney upon which he lay spun and moved slowly. Unseen forces bumped the foot of the rolling table against stainless-steel-clad double doors. He exited the room, face up into a narrow hallway that flicked bright ceiling light as he passed under. He craned his head to see where he was or who was pushing the gurney, but his head would not move.

Unfamiliar sounds of clattering casters on ancient carts and hushed conversations drifted in and out of his sphere of existence. The smell of alcohol, urine and disinfectant combined to confuse his struggle to recognize his surroundings.

The rolling slab banged through another set of double doors and continued until veering into a solitary room. Two Negro men removed the

leather straps from his ankles, hips, forehead and finally his wrists. They gently lifted him onto a narrow bed. He felt the cool fresh sheets, the fan overhead. Sleep came easily.

"Good morning Mr. Bennett. How are you today?" asked the doctor in the long white coat.

"Unh," was all he could manage.

"Do you know where you are?" asked the doctor. "Do you know who I am? Do you know this lovely lady?" he asked pointing to a smiling Louise.

"Unh," he replied. He tried desperately to remember.

His wrists and feet, fastened to the bed allowed for limited movement. As the pretty woman and the doctor left the room, he looked around and saw a chair, a window, a door closing behind them.

Louise walked with Dr. Jackson through the hallways of highly polished linoleum. In the doctor's office she listened intently as he reviewed the charts. She put her purse on the floor and leaned closer to the doctor's desk.

"Electroconvulsive, or shock therapy as you know it, is not as experimental as you might think. We have been using it for quite some time with relatively successful results," said the doctor.

"I understand," said Louise.

"Here are Mr. Bennett's charts from yesterday's treatment. The first application of electricity to his brain failed to produce a seizure," said Dr. Jackson.

Louise felt the queasiness come back. She didn't like the smell of this place. She liked this conversation even less.

He continued, "The second surge was applied sixty seconds later and produced a seizure of twenty-five seconds."

She took a deep breath and felt faint.

"The third application produced a seizure lasting one minute and thirty-one seconds. We consider this a success," said Dr. Jackson. He paused. "Mrs. Bennett, are you OK?"

"I'll be alright. I just need a minute," said Louise. The lightheadedness subsided and she said, "Go on."

"Each patient responds with different results, but I believe this is a start," said Dr. Jackson.

"What happens now?" said Louise.

"This procedure is approved by the Veterans Administration for Mr. Bennett's depression and paranoid schizophrenia, so we will keep him for the next three weeks and repeat the procedure every other day."

"Will he be cured?" asked Louise.

"Cured is a subjective term," said the doctor. "Psychiatry is a science of

degrees. What may be complete cure for one patient may only be a beginning for another."

"How will I know?"

"Only time will tell, Mrs. Bennett. I think you will see an improvement in Mr. Bennett's behavior toward you and your family." He said.

While they spoke James woke in another part of the hospital. He looked through the security bars on the window at the palm trees swaying in the afternoon sunshine. He felt as if he had been beaten. Every muscle in his body ached. His neck and feet were especially tender.

Time became meaningless as he drifted in and out of consciousness. Night became day. Clouds became rain. Sun became moon. The dreams frightened him. He did not understand them as he did before.

The Negro men appeared and transferred him to the gurney. He decided to resist them, but had no energy and no desire to scuffle. He went along as docile as he had ever been with anyone.

This was repeated over and over again. How many times? He didn't know. James vowed to himself to count, but became confused before and after each treatment. No calendars. No radio. No clocks.

He gained awareness of the trips and awoke feeling less groggy each time. He was aware of a strange woman visiting him and holding his hand sometime between the treatments. Louise always smiled when he awoke and looked at her. He would not smile back, because she was one of *them*. *She put him here*.

He awoke one morning and spoke cheerfully with Doctor Jackson and answered his questions with alertness and acuity. His memory began to build. He remembered Louise talking to him about getting help. Vague details of his life began emerging. He remembered torment from demons he could not conquer, but he felt as strong as ever in his battle with them.

He vowed to himself to win this time. He remembered Louise and the boys. He remembered Rachael, his love. He hoped he wouldn't be forced to discipline the boys as much. He would pray and ask God for protection from the evil chasing him.

When Louise visited him the next day she said, "James, Doctor Jackson said he thinks you will be able to come home next week."

"How long have I been here?" he asked.

"Three weeks tomorrow," she said.

"Why do I have to stay until next week?" he asked.

"They don't want to send you home with the bruises," she said.

On a sunny morning pajama-clad James shuffled out of Halifax Hospital and into the waiting car. The drive home was quiet. Louise made the turn at

Tomoka Road and headed for home. She parked in the side yard and helped James up the rear steps and into the spare bedroom where she could keep an eye on him.

Louise helped him to the bathroom and watched as he recoiled from his image in the mirror. Great black bags under his eyes, and a bluish-yellow bruise across his forehead revealed the trauma he had been through. He felt weak and nauseous. She left him alone and came back when she heard the toilet flush.

The calendar on the kitchen wall showed June 1952. Louise eased him into bed. He felt exhausted from his ordeal. Louise brought him a pill and glass of water.

He adjusted his pillow and fell into a deep sleep.

Over the next few weeks, James scuffed around the house in leather slippers and pajamas. He read his Bible with new intensity, underlining key phrases, while he searched God's words for direction in his life.

His weight dropped and he chain smoked Pall Malls. Louise prepared a lawn chair and small table for him under the shade of the giant oak tree in the rear. He sat there for hours, looking at his black Chevy with the sleek lines. He hadn't waxed it in months, and refused to let the boys touch it, even after they offered.

Louise watched him through the window as she tidied the kitchen and washed dishes. She prayed for his healing and hoped the violent rage stayed at bay.

She puzzled at him. James appeared to be in animated conversation with someone at his feet. His big hands opened and turned palms up as he explained a particular point to the visitor.

She watched as he continued his discussion. She put down the dish and dried her hands on the white apron. Louise started towards the screen door when she saw movement on the ground.

A four-foot-long black snake, stretched out in the sun, tongue sampling the environment, lay near James feet. The shiny creature, fat on rodents, lazed for a moment and then meandered off. James picked up his Bible and returned to his reading.

The realization came slowly. Louise's hands trembled. She reached for her pack of Lucky Strikes and thought *Dear God he's talking to a snake.*



My name is Pat Guttery. Memories of raucous days of the ragtag band of children living on Tomoka Road in Daytona Beach, caused me to put to paper, what I carried in my mind and heart for many years. This journey revealed facts, dates and important stories of pioneer settlers, preachers, warriors, and modern day heroes. My great fortune is growing up in a culture of families and neighbors who watched after and took care of one another.