

SHOCKED INTO SUBMISSION...

Between about 1981 and 1995, my mother was a resident at Riverview Hospital, our provincial mental health facility. I was probably about 15 when she was admitted. It was the last and most drastic move in a series of difficult moves for her.

The reasons for her landing in Riverview went something like this:

- In 1977, she tried to drink herself to death, self-medicating through a serious depression. She almost succeeded, but survived and came out of Burnaby General Hospital with permanent brain damage and a different, more simplified personality.
- We could not keep her at home, unsupervised – she would need some kind of constant care and supervision – so she was admitted into the first of what would be a few different private care hospitals around Vancouver. (I remember one out in the Old Orchard neighbourhood of Kingsway in Burnaby, and later, Como Lake Private Hospital in Coquitlam.)
- She was, I was told, difficult to care for, and at Como Lake had to be strapped to a bed on one occasion. Apparently, after she struck a nurse and walked out into the snow, trying to find her way home, Como Lake Hospital said that she had to go.
- I really don't think those private hospitals were equipped to handle her manic-depression or emotional outbursts. So, after that, she went to Burnaby Psychiatric Centre, near Willingdon Avenue in Burnaby. I thought she seemed to be doing much better there. It seemed like a more professional and structured environment. Dad told us that it was basically a "holding pen" for Riverview.
- Dad said the word "Riverview" like it was a threat – a bad consequence that Mum would get if she didn't behave herself. She'd been there before, back in the early 70s, when I was about 8 or 9, so she knew what it was like. I think Riverview was not anywhere she wanted to be, but by 1980 or so, that's where she ended up.

I was very afraid of Riverview with its high ceilings, large heavy doors with their loud metal locks, and the wide linoleum floors surrounded by windows covered by metal grills.

The women's ward that my mother was on in what was called "Centre Lawn Unit" was, to my young eyes, identical in age, layout and spirit to the men's ward shown in the movie "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest", or to the wards seen in the movie "Awakenings". Not kind of similar. Almost identical.

It was heart-wrenching to leave Mum behind in there after our first visit. She cried and pleaded to come home. She kept asking us "when can I come home?". It hurt so much to not know what to say, or worse, to know that there was nothing that could be said, that she might never ever leave, and that she either didn't realize it, or worse, that she knew deep-down, but couldn't accept it.

Gradually, over the first year or two, our Sunday drives out to see Mum at Riverview lessened to only every two weeks, and then even less, as I recall. It seemed to have become too much for Dad, and on our visits, he began to claim that a sore back prevented him from climbing up the stairs to go inside, leaving it up to me and my sister Kim to go in while he sat in the car and smoked. I saw through his smokescreen, and in my teenaged binary thinking, I deeply resented him for being a coward and for leaving the burden solely for his kids. Looking back now, Mum's near-death and physical and mental degradation must have broken his spirit and defeated him utterly. It was the final break-up of their marriage – a consequence of things that I only partially had seen as I grew up, and the full truth of which I will never really know. He still loved her, so he told me later, but he always talked about her in the past tense even while she was still alive. Nobody really talked about my Mum Angela after she went to Riverview. She was out there, but she was also just... gone.

Eventually, after Dad had a heart attack and multiple strokes in 1983, his driving days were finished. In 1984, I went out on my own on the bus to visit Mum a number of times. I wanted to take some responsibility for her in a way, and I wanted to see her and maybe try to know her in some way. I also didn't want her to be basically abandoned by her family.

By 1984 or 1985, she seemed to not recognize me any more or to remember my name. It was painful to try and remind her every time, but I

perservered, and would also bring her a chocolate bar and enjoy her enthusiastic, child-like chewing. She was toothless by this point and ate with the enthusiasm and impatience of a toddler, sometimes coughing it out onto a bib or towel around her neck. She was reduced to a baby's kind of existence, and I never knew if it was due to some of the meds she was on, or to some mental degradation from years of minimal stimulation.

Over the first couple of years that Mum was in Riverview, we noticed her behaviour change. Her emotions seemed dead and gone, as if her remaining spirit and personality had left her. She had become quieter and distant, and would only speak in monosyllables. In the years later, she would rock back and forth, somewhat extremely, or tremor or shake her arms up and down on the sides of her wheelchair. I never knew what her body language was telling me. Was it involuntary, or was she agitated or excited about something?

Once, after one of Mum's cousins visited her in Riverview, we heard that the cousin had claimed that Mum had undergone electroshock therapy, nowadays called E.C.T. It was, to me, at the time, a barbaric idea, and I didn't want to accept it. It felt like that was the worst stigma of psychiatric treatment, like a form of modern-day torture, and I didn't want to think that my mother would be put through something that I thought was so violent.

But, there's every likelihood that Angela did go through E.C.T. at Riverview. I've read recently that it was a fairly commonly-used therapy at Riverview until maybe the early 2000s.

I'll just leave this here... <http://www.ect.org/news/130shocks.html>