

A Simple Procedure

Yael Inokai
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A Simple Procedure, Yael Inokai's powerful and thoughtful new novel, explores what happens when an affective disorder – a disorder of the mind – is treated with surgery. Sometimes, trying to find a cure can lead to unintended consequences.

"I believe they saw something sick and wanted to treat it. And they did. Until nothing was left of her."

Author
Born 1989 in Basel, Yael Inokai lives in Berlin. Her debut novel *Storchenbiss* was published in 2012. She was awarded the Swiss Literary Prize 2018 for her second novel *Mahlstrom*. She is a member of the editorial board of the magazine "PS: Politisch Schreiben." She received the Anna Seghers Prize for her latest novel *Ein simpler Eingriff* (2022)

Photo: Ladina Bischof

A Simple Procedure

Yael Inokai

Excerpt translated by Helen Nurse

October, time for ghosts. I see myself as a young woman again in the mirror. My gaze is full of conviction, untroubled by doubt. I am in my mid-twenties, and I understand the world.

Later, once I knew more, I longed to go back to that time, when my faith protected me.

Back then I was a nurse at a hospital which was introducing a new kind of procedure. The procedure was meant to free people from psychological disorders and discharge the patients into a new future, a real future, not just a continued existence.

I held onto that hope. As a rule, our work at the hospital was not exactly lacking in hopelessness. Often enough there was nothing more we could do. Nothing more, other nurses would never have put it like that. We were to be there until the end, and beyond. But for me, that pronouncement tore open an abyss, every time.

I was the one who assisted the doctor during the procedure. He guided his instruments to the affected part of the brain and neutralized it. The men and women were conscious the whole time, that way, we could be sure that the healthy tissue would remain intact. I kept them occupied and put them at ease, taking away their fear. I called it compassion: I'm good at it because I have mastered the art

It was a simple procedure. The side effects could be painful, but they soon passed. Then it was the beginning of something new. That is what I was taught. I clung to that.

MARIANNE

1

The first sound of the day: rain on the window. The other's footsteps. The rattling of bikes being pulled off stands and loaded up, before the first of us got on and disappeared into the morning.

The staff accommodation for nurses was on the outskirts. Down the road, on the right, was where the industrial estate began. We always went left to the clinic, past the terraced houses with their deep pitched roofs and through a small, wooded area. About half-way you could turn off to get to town.

The halls of residence had periods of loud and quiet. Never silence. Sometimes a dream tore my night to shreds, and I lay there in the dark, listening to the house. I listened to the water rushing through the pipes behind the wall and thought of the apartment I grew up in, which I believed for the longest time was made of paper. I lay there, listening to the sound of others falling into bed, a tired body ten times heavier than when awake, and I realised how much a bed has to support; bones and flesh and blood, and all the things a person has seen.

Just before the alarm clock purred, I fell asleep again. Those few minutes catapulted me far away. I needed a moment to come to. I stretched my toes out from under the covers, then my fingers, the only thing I hadn't buried was my head. My shoes were never where I was expecting them, I stepped onto the cold floor, every time. The shock struck the soles of my feet like a misguided bolt of lightning. Come on, no time for dawdling.

Our room was the furthest away from the toilets, which were at the far end of the corridor. The passage to get to them was narrow and cold, two windows led directly off the yard. Each morning I performed a shivery little dance there whilst I waited in the queue to relieve myself.

There was a sour smell above the wash basins. Arms were lifted, armpits washed with flannels. The reek of unquiet dreams hung in the air too, the sandy earthiness as the unhappy tried to rub the sleep from their eyes.

I washed my hands and splashed cold water on my cheeks, forehead and mouth. I drank and spat out the night that always lay furred on my tongue.

After washing, I put on one of my dresses. I chose them according to the weather. Their job was to get me

from A to B. I was careless with them. Others pointed out the tears, tiny holes and stains.

The breakfast we had in the dining room was a quick affair. Five minutes was plenty. Hardly any of us were hungry at that time of day. There were those, like me, conditioned to eat if food was around. Impassive, they consumed the porridge and apples, gratefully drinking the weak coffee. There were some who bolted two or three helpings, storing them up for later. Amongst the diners, a few upbeat types, treating breakfast as if it were a proper meal. No-one left anything. A nurse with an empty stomach was of no use.

Back in my room, all I pulled on was a thin jacket. I closed the door behind me, joining the stream of nurses going down the stairs, putting on their shoes and making their way to the bikes. Unerringly, I grabbed the familiar handlebars. We got on and set off, saying nothing. The bikes played their own, rattling concert.

I had been working at the hospital for eight years. I couldn't imagine any other world. No other routine than this one, amongst the nurses, like sisters, everyone getting ready for their duties.

2

I was proud of who I was when I wore my uniform. I can remember exactly how it felt in the changing room, morning after morning, the starched white fabric on my skin, fastening the buttons, attaching my watch to my uniform, putting on my nurse's cap. The person that I became. All my life, I had never wanted to be anything else.

My ward was on the fifth floor. I had done most of my training there and just stayed.

Before the shift, I washed my hands. The icy water no longer made them jump. They had got used to the brush I used to scrub them free of dirt. In the first few months they were chapped and crimson, constantly sore, screaming at me when I lay in bed in the evenings, wanting to sleep. But our bodies can get used to just about anything.

Then came the shift handover. The night nurses tried not to let the last few hours show. They looked at me as they passed on a room number. A couple of them looked straight through me as they did so, in their eyes the abyss.

It was only a room number. Someone had died. At those moments I felt fresh disbelief in my throat, time and time again.

When I entered the room, they had already been cleaned. It used to be my job to clear away the traces of the deceased. I scoured death from the room and restored order to the things left behind. Every book and every photo had the power to make me feel nauseous then. I was glad when that feeling passed.

Then the suitcases became my responsibility. I had to deal with them before the millstones of my day ground into motion. Death was a matter for the night. Only rarely did people dare to prove the exception.

I always found the suitcases lying on the table. All the things the deceased had unpacked on arrival had been stowed again. I undid the buckles and checked whether everything had been repacked carefully. Then I closed the case, pulled it off the table and took it to the storeroom for lost property. We kept them there for six weeks. If no one came to claim them, then we gave them to the poorhouses.

Now and again, I became aware that a suitcase had been picked up. Then I saw the men, women and children in the corridors. They'd seated themselves on the benches with the open cases, their hands buried in jumpers and dresses. An open book, which someone had been reading until a few days ago. Helplessly rummaging through pictures, papers and perfume bottles. Perhaps they were surprised to see that everything was still there. Or perhaps they'd thought they had known all there was to know about that person, but now they were a mystery once more.

Other cases were left behind. I was good at guessing in advance which ones those would be, even if I didn't want to be. I put those pieces of luggage on the furthest-most shelf so I wouldn't have to see them every

time I opened the door. But I still hoped that someone might come and get them, just as I hoped that someone might come and sit in one of the empty chairs next to the beds for a few minutes, reach out a hand and say hello. It's no more difficult than breathing really. And yet nothing is harder than that.

The older nurses used to say: work with time. It will be on your side. Not now, not tomorrow, but someday, when you have been here long enough and the number of those you have cared for is far beyond counting.

Essentially, it was easy enough. Each of us had the ability to put it all behind us - the days, months and years filled with the doubts they hold for a young person. At some point there came a day when the march of time was strong enough. You just had to keep going.

The nurses said, get up every morning the same as you did yesterday, drink your coffee, get on your bike, come here, do your job and you'll keep a level head. You'll get better and better at it every time, until the job is just part of you. Like your lungs are part of you. And your heart is part of you. Then you won't be afraid of it affecting you too deeply anymore. You'll start to see the bigger picture instead of the individual faces. The nausea? Don't worry about it, it'll pass.

One time, a suitcase fell to the floor. Its owner had had a long journey and her strength deserted her at the last minute. I just heard the muffled sound as it hit the floor, but I knew she was standing in the corridor waiting for me.

One suitcase amongst a thousand, with two books, two photos, a biro, a pencil, a passport, a dress, a cardigan, a nightdress, underwear, two slippers, a hairbrush, perfume, nail varnish, a handful of photos, a key and a pack of cards.

The older nurses said I should work with time. Time would free me from those images.

Sarah didn't believe in any of that: "I'll never forget my patients' faces. What makes you think time could be on our side?"

3

There was a book. I had opened it countless times to read it to my sister. "Once upon a time ..." It was the story of a vixen who fell asleep in the basket of a hot air balloon, then flew around the world by accident.

As a child, Bibi had never wanted to hear anything else at bedtime, just this one story. You could even use it to lure her back to bed from her nocturnal wanderings.

She had been born five years after me, to everyone's surprise. For a while, she shared a room with my elder brother Wilm and I - the apartment only had two bedrooms and one of those firmly belonged to my parents. But at some point Wilm had packed his things, announced he wouldn't survive growing up so close to two sisters, and moved into the kitchen. Every morning he folded up the bed. It became a bench during the day, where all three of us took our places at the table. Bibi and I were only allowed to sit on it once he'd spread the cover over.

She often visited him whilst sleepwalking. Wilm, who had heard the story of the vixen countless times, could recount it without so much as a glance at the book. I heard him tell it sometimes half asleep. First the shriek, when he found our sister in his bed at night, her eyes vacant because she was elsewhere. Then the words, his warm voice, croaking every now and then.

When I left to start my training, Bibi tucked the book, loved to pieces, in my luggage unnoticed. I only found it a couple of weeks after my arrival at the nurses' residence. The onset of winter called for a thick woolly cardigan. She had wrapped it inside. With a message on the first page: *So you'll find your way back to me.*

4

The woman and I were both 25 years old. I saw in her notes that our birthdays were only three days apart. I made a point of remembering that.

Her father was running late, so to begin with she was standing by herself in the corridor, looking around. She was not shaking and there was no fear in her

eyes. It is possible to stop oneself looking scared, but the body can only be tricked for so long. Hands become damp with sweat, they lose their grip on the luggage, held tightly a moment before. And the suitcase betrays with a loud thud that it has been crammed full. Never thinking that it will be for the long haul. A heavy suitcase wants to bring the feeling of home to a strange room - home with all its superfluous knick-knacks - so that the time spent there will be bearable.

The woman arrived in the morning. I had just finished one procedure and the patient was drifting slowly, without complications, out of the anaesthetic back into her smarting body. The doctor loved to operate in the morning and start the day with it; he didn't count the ward rounds first thing. He also liked the night, the emergencies, he never griped if he was paged to the clinic in the small hours. The afternoons, however, those he couldn't handle. The empty hours when the morning had grown tired and was listlessly waiting for the evening to begin. That was when the doctor withdrew and dealt with paperwork.

The woman had picked up her suitcase again. She was unmistakably an Ellerbach, tall and upright, with an erect bearing and slender face that could never have belonged to a poor person. That face went with money and a certain recognition in the world. A family of industrialists, well-known in the town. Their factories were on the industrial estate behind the nurses' residence. They were also a family of philanthropists. This was really at the heart of their operation; the father never grew tired of emphasising this in public. The company's foundation redeveloped schools and libraries and funded scholarships for the gifted and talented. It converted private land into public parks. The Ellerbachs were inscribed across the city. You came across plaques with their name on everywhere.

That's what I thought of when I saw the woman for the first time in the flesh. I recognised her face from the paper. There were four of them, the Ellerbach children. Three brothers and her. She was the youngest. Her name was Marianne.

I extended a hand, and she gave me her suitcase, not

mistaking the gesture for a greeting as others did. "Hello, have you come to get me?" – She barely glanced at me at first. She was still taking in her surroundings, her gaze following two passing nurses. That gave me time to gain a first impression in peace, to swallow my surprise at how little she stood out, despite everything. "It's a lovely day, isn't it?" – Her gaze hung at a half-open door. She tried to peer in, stretching past me – "Goodness, it's very ... white ... in here. Doesn't that bother you?"

She gave up exploring. She turned to me, looking at me properly for the first time. I too was tall and upright. She wasn't expecting that. She was used to looking down at the tops of people's heads, but she was forced to look me right in the eyes.

"You're tall," she remarked and laughed at her discovery so loudly that the two nurses passing in the corridor turned around.

"My name is Meret," I said.
"It suits you."

There was a blue box. It was my toolbox for procedures of this kind. It was full of things that kept people occupied: books, pictures, puzzles, card games, matches, a flip book, a mini concertina. It was mostly stuff that had been left behind, taken from the suitcases shortly before we handed them over to the poorhouse.

The things were there for me too. They gave me something to hold onto. I felt confident when I took the blue box out of the cupboard and brought it to my patients.

It was easy to find something for Marianne Ellerbach. When she opened her case, I saw a pack of cards between her hairbrush and her perfume. I knew then that she would like the cards from the box. It was a particularly beautiful deck, with a delicate pattern on the back.

"I saw our birthdays are only three days apart," I said. "You were first, on September the twelfth, then it was my turn on the fifteenth."

"Really?" she stopped arranging her things and sat down on the bed, not hesitating for a second. She jiggled her feet. I thought at that moment that she had a great deal of freedom. Wherever she went, she could just take a seat. She never questioned if this or that space was meant for her.

We both looked at the door where we were expecting her father and the doctor. I knew so much about her, and she knew nothing about me. I knew about her episodes. There was an anger in her that could grow so huge that it detonated, destroying everything around her with wild accusations, screaming and acts of violence. The anger came on suddenly. Anyone near her at that moment barely had enough time to get themselves to safety. The physical superiority of the three brothers was hardly any use, Marianne's fury was bigger than them.

I had often seen photos of the Ellerbach family in the local paper. The father was surrounded by his three sons, daughter and wife, and invariably looked as though he were the only one in the picture. Marianne always stood next to the same brother, the youngest, the two of them were 18 months apart. He looked astonishingly like his father.

In our family photos, Bibi always stood next to Wilm. Always next to her big brother, whose hair, nose and mouth were like his father's. Not his eyes though.

Whilst Marianne's gaze swept slowly around the room, I watched her. You couldn't tell she had episodes. Yes, there was the loud laugh, the restless limbs. And she was childlike. She could have been at least fifteen years younger, the way she openly stared wherever she felt like it, at anything or anyone. Aside from that, there was no sign of her disorder. Although the seemingly normal can flip abruptly at any time. I knew that by now.

She didn't get up when the father entered the room. "Morning," he said to his daughter, and she nodded in acknowledgement, half-heartedly returning the greeting. She was probably the only person in the world who didn't intuitively rise when a man like that entered the

room. As for me, I took a step backwards when I saw him, it was utterly involuntary.

She let him kiss her forehead. He put his hand briefly to the back of her head and pulled her close. "Now, now," he murmured. For one moment, a second maybe, he wasn't an Ellerbach. He didn't fill the entire room. He was simply a father being affectionate to his daughter. She continued jiggling her feet, not a grown woman, but a child, submitting to his affection.

When the doctor arrived, I noticed to my surprise that even he seemed paler compared to an Ellerbach, like a photo whose colours had faded. Yet he was usually an impressive presence. This had nothing to do with physical attributes. The doctor was neither tall nor broad shouldered, nor was his face special in any way. But he knew who he was and with this certainty he took command of everything.

"Good morning," the doctor now said, and when the customary effect failed to materialise, he turned to me, indicated the file in my hand and instructed me to "Take notes, please." He might as well have said "Breathe."

It had been important to Mr Ellerbach that the doctor meet them first without his assistant. A special request from special patients. Made by anyone else, it would have been refused indignantly. Yet this time the doctor had even seated himself on a chair, so he was eye level with his patient.

"These episodes ...," he began.

"That's not me!"

He nodded. Grateful for the interjection. "No, that's not you. Of course it isn't. Which is why I would like to help you get rid of your anger. If you will allow me."

She nodded hesitantly.

"There is something inside you and I want to make it go to sleep. It won't bother you anymore. It will be asleep for ever. It's as simple as that."

The doctor explained to her what would happen, leaving out all the words that could cause unnecessary

anxiety. The father had been given a different version of the explanation. And the staff yet another. Nonetheless, what he was saying here was the truth. Despite all the simplicity, it was a delicate operation. Fear made things delicate.

The woman listened. Sometimes she asked, "Will it hurt?"

"No, it won't hurt."

For the first time since the others had entered the room, she sought my gaze. I nodded in agreement. No, it wouldn't hurt. That came later. But that wasn't mentioned at the time.

Then the doctor steered the conversation back to her episodes. He started and ended the conversation with them so she wouldn't forget how serious her problem was or get the idea she could continue living with her episodes after all. "Imagine your illness is like the tide," he said, "like the waters of the sea ebbing and flowing. Just as surely as the waters recede, so, inevitably, they will rise. The further they recede, the higher the waters rise." He paused a moment, trying to gauge from Marianne's eyes whether he had chosen the right meta-phor. "At some point, this tide will rip everything with it. Then the only course left to us will be to treat it with medication, to protect your loved ones, and you, from yourself."

He took two photographs from his notes and showed them to her. A young woman, her age. And the same woman, just a little older, after the medication had done its damage.

Marianne looked at the photos disinterestedly, they did not shock her as intended. She would think about it later though, when the doubts grew in her and with them, the need to get up and leave. Then the woman in the picture would come back to her.

"It's important that you are awake," the doctor said finally. He didn't always broach this point so gently. A lack of time sometimes caused him to raise it just as he was about to leave the room. Then I was left to deal with it. But not with her. She was given the precise, consid-

erate approach, his words carefully chosen. "You will guide us. You will be conscious without pain and without fear. You will be there, with us. You will have your eyes open." –

"No," she said. Her voice was shaking. "I don't want to. I want to be asleep and when I wake up, it will all be over."

"It will be like being asleep."

"And why can't I be properly asleep?"

"It will be quicker than going to the dentist." The father. You could always count on that: help from the relatives, sabotaging the whole softly-softly approach at the last minute.

"The dentists!" She clasped her hand to her jaw, looking frantically from the doctor to the door. Her mind clattered. They weren't good memories. She wanted to run away.

"We'll play cards," I said. I put the file down, took the deck from the blue box and showed it to her. Her father looked at me for the first time. He hadn't noticed me before; I was just another object in the room.

"I can play cards during the whole thing?" Her hand fell from her jaw, she took the cards and fanned them out in her hand. The gesture was familiar to her. That would make it easier. Skin has its own memory. It can always bring us back.

"Yes, or sing. Some people sing. If there is a song you like ... then we can sing that too."

The fear subsided a little from her gaze. She twisted her hand to look at the back of the cards more closely. "You know," she then said, turning to her father, "that nurse was only born three days after me."

The brain is a map. Everything I am is located there. That was the image I had before me as I grew into the job. It made sense. A tumour can crush the optical nerves, leading to blindness. Neurological diseases can

take away people's memories, language and motor skills bit by bit, until even their sense of touch is gone. It was possible to locate these illnesses. Why should mental illness be any different? Why shouldn't we be able to eradicate it and discharge patients into a life worthy of the name?

The procedure was only short. We didn't usually spend more than an hour in the operating theatre. It was simple, and like everything simple, it had taken a long time to develop and perfect. The right tools, the right hands knowing how to use them, and the right voices to accompany the procedure. And the failures of course. No-one liked to talk about those. Yet the developments rested on those foundations.

The doctor just needed to find the affected part, then put it to sleep, like a sick animal. That was his job. Mine was to keep the patients occupied. I had to distract them from the process and keep interacting with them. Their being awake assured us that the doctor and his instruments had found the right place. I paid close attention to every word and every glance. I took away people's fear, a fear that could surge despite the instructions the sedatives gave the body.

This was how we worked together.

The developments at that time met with distrust in many places. The procedure had not yet been tried and tested. The very first few times, the brain parts were not put to sleep but severed. "Like cutting through a cable" – that was how the doctor put it when he told me about the early days. Was that really necessary, I asked him. Weren't there other ways of getting to the same point at which we now found ourselves. His stance on this was very clear. And in the years in which we knew each other, he never budged from this position. "Progress can be painful. Things will get better, but first they have to get worse. That's just how it is."

That's just how it was. It was one of those doors that shut, behind which the doctor disappeared. Sometimes the doors to his office were closed, sometimes the

doors to his eyes. I envied him that.

As far as the procedure itself was concerned, the opinions of the nurses on our ward varied. If they had an opinion at all that is. Some of them had got good at curing themselves of opinions. The rules and regulations were always there to fall back on. Opinions could not cushion you in the same way.