

# The Fury of Shock Treatment— A Patient's View

By Elizabeth Wertz

W.S. Sullivan  
ET

*In the high days of summer, breaking into the endless political discussions of welfare and China and peace and war, came Sen. Thomas F. Eagleton, Democratic vice presidential candidate, telling the country that, in a time of depression, he had been hospitalized and received shock treatments. He slid off the ticket amid murmurs about fingers on the button and how he'd let down the team, and behind him he left a renewed discussion of an old controversy—the value of shock in treating the mentally ill.*

*Doctors have split on the subject since the treatment first gained popularity in the '40s. Some feel it helps certain types of mental illness—those springing from the immediate past and not the roots of childhood. Others argue that the muddling and erasing of memory interferes with future treatment.*

*Dr. Zigmond M. Lebensohn, a Washington psychiatrist who was one of the earlier practitioners of electric shock treatment, says its use has diminished since the introduction of tranquilizers and anti-depressant drugs. Such drugs take weeks to work, however, and during that time, says Dr. Lebensohn, "a person may suicide."*

*Dr. Lebensohn reacts angrily to attacks on shock treatment, calling it a "dramatically effective instrument to curtail deep depression and in certain types of problems it can be lifesaving."*

*There are patients who feel shock treatments have given them back their lives, but there are also those who take years to recover from what they see as a violation of their person and their past.*

*The author of the following article is opposed to shock treatment because of what she saw it do to others and because of what it did to her. The names and places in her article have been changed. The experience, which took place in the '50s, has not.*

Shock treatments are a controversial manner of treating emotional problems, notably depression. The patient is rendered unconscious and experiences a

Elizabeth Wertz is a free lance writer and former Washingtonian.

grand mal seizure, that is, a convulsion, just as does an epileptic. Observations of epileptics led to the first shock treatments, when, in 1928, Ladislaus Joseph von Meduna reproduced a grand mal seizure in a patient suffering from madness, by an injection of metrazol. His reason for doing this was that mental patients rarely suffered from epilepsy, or epileptics from madness, and he hoped to cure the madness with the epilepsy.

Because the patient is in agony between the injection of the metrazol and the seizure, psychiatrists have searched for a faster way to produce convulsions and metrazol is now used mainly for prisoners, for whom some feel the punishment is justified. In 1933, Manfred Sakel introduced insulin shock. The patient is given increasing doses of insulin, until he receives enough to produce a coma. The daily injections are then continued for about two and one half to three months. Insulin shock therapy takes time. It is difficult to administer and can produce adverse reactions, including death. The search continued for a better, faster method of producing convulsions and convulsions continued to be regarded as the answer to problems, particularly the problems of those people who seemed to be in a chronic state of madness or insanity, from which it was doubtful if they would ever recover any other way.

An electric current can produce convulsions more rapidly than chemicals, and Ugo Cerletti and L. Bini perfected an electrical technique in 1938, essentially the same method that is used today. This technique was extended to many types of problems for which people wanted solutions—and quick solutions. Now most mental hospitals have their "shock box," as the personnel call it, and some, particularly private institutions, have nothing else to offer.

Anne was my roommate in a private Midwest mental hospital and she died during an electroshock treatment. At that time, during the '50s, tranquilizers were not in use. Shock treatments were the only answer for those psychiatrists who wanted to do something practical, efficient, and

quick to the many troubled people who turned to them for help with their problems. The chief of the clinic was such a psychiatrist.

I don't know whether the chief ever tried to talk with Anne, to find out what was on her mind or what she might like to work out. He did not talk with me at all, ever. I am certain, however, that he did fully expect Anne to be cured from her depression and become a happy, busy person after he was through with her. This was his reason for giving her shock treatments, and her own wishes did not sway him.

She was in terror of them. So was I, though I wasn't getting any at that time. So was every mental patient I knew.

"Maybe the machine will break down," Anne said, the last night of her life, as she picked at her food.

We ate supper from trays in our room, sitting on our beds and facing each other across the little table. The food was good, the place was quiet and the location was pleasant. It was the best of the mental hospitals in which I was a patient. And Anne was a model roommate in many ways; she was always thoughtful and pleasant.

She tried to "be good," so that she would get out of the hospital. The only way she knew to be on her good behavior was to behave the same way she would at a dinner party she did not want to attend but felt she should for her husband's sake. She kept up appearances by being poised and pleasant, dressing carefully. She didn't discuss politics or religion; she sought tirelessly to find topics of mutual interest, and she was never rude. A suburban housewife all dressed up with no place to go.

Stand up straight, smile, and be interested in the other person. This was something that had gotten her through other trying situations, and she hoped it would this time. It was all she could do. She tried very hard. I wonder how many really tough Marines could do as well. One minute in kindergarten, the next in a maximum security prison. Shock treatments every morning and dishonesty all the time.

She didn't even know that she was coming to a mental hospital;

she was told that she was out for a ride. Labels were put on her clothes, and she, too, was given a label. Sick. Not specific sick, but generally sick. Not the same as other people. Because of this, she was supposed to let anybody do anything to her. Including knock her out every morning. Not only that, but she was expected and urged to be quite calm.

If you want to know how it feels to be in Anne's position, just imagine yourself in the path of a tornado that has everything about you falling apart. Everything that is important to you, that you have worked for, is no longer there. Everyone you liked and trusted is gone, too, inside someplace safe. Not only the present and the past are swept away, but you no longer have a future. Now, don't you get upset about it.

"He must love me," she said about her husband. "This hospital, as crazy as it is, is very expensive. We could have taken a trip together. If only he would take my name off the list, I'd be so happy. Nothing else makes any sense."

Torn between her terror of the treatments and her feelings for her husband, she didn't really like herself when she broke down and told me about her fears. It was not something that she would ordinarily do. I was not her friend. I wasn't even her own age. She was all alone.

She asked her husband, very politely, to discontinue the shock treatments. She asked the chief of the clinic, too. They pretended that they did not hear her. Anne no longer owned her body, her head, or her own soul. She had no voice at all in what happened to her.

A doctor, the resident psychiatrist, came by at night after supper, doubtless to soothe her so that she would be rested up for her treatment. She had some sort of heart trouble, as she took digitalis pills each day, without comment or explanation. This condition, whatever it was, did not bother her as she was used to it. Nor did she ever mention any problems, other than the shock treatments.

"Thank you for coming by, doctor. How do you like this weather? It is unusually mild for  
Continued on page 45

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**Shock, from page 36**  
March, isn't it? Do you have much opportunity to get out and enjoy yourself?"

He was a kind type. Years behind where he should have been in his profession, he was a refugee. He fled from Germany to Argentina, and then to Cleveland trying to make a life for himself. He was big-boned, and calm. He had learned to be cautious, both in what he said and in what he did not say. He talked about inconsequential things in a deep voice, with a charming accent; but he never really said anything. I suppose he couldn't. He was not in charge and made no decisions at the clinic.

There we sat, as darkness came on outside. Each of us was worried about a real and pressing situation. My own was that I could be transferred, at any minute, to a state institution. Or I could be, like Anne, put on shock treatments. We talked some more about the weather. Then Anne brought up real life, trying to sound very casual.

"Tell me, doctor, am I scheduled to get a shock treatment tomorrow?"

"Now, what makes you think of that? Here you have plenty of leisure time, somebody to cook your meals and bring them to you, a charming companion, all that a woman could hope for. Yet, you bring up such a subject. Shame on you."

Madhouses really are quite mad.

Morning. Breakfast came for me and none for Anne. This is the signal that one is going to get a treatment, no breakfast. Anne was white. She had no expression at all.

Outside the room, everything was bustle and busyness. A doctor arrived and began to direct activities in the hall. It is the spring housecleaning sort of atmosphere. You want

to get out of the way until it is over.

When the treatments were over that day, everything was quiet again. The psychiatrists were gone, the attendants were gone. The hall was nearly empty. All that remained to show for the morning's great burst of energy was a corpse, wrapped in a sheet, lying on a high cart. It was Anne. Alone, she had gone to her treatment, to her death.

"Help me. Help me!" John was calling to me, wanting me to do something for him as he struggled with two men. The men were dragging him down the hall without any explanation. As far as he was concerned, he was being accosted. Bewilderment mingled with anger in his voice.

He was going to the shock treatment room. He was one of the few who went, and he did not know, that first day, what was happening to him. He was in his room, the room somebody told him to stay in, when the men came in and dragged him out. They were attendants at a Massachusetts mental hospital.

Nobody moved, none of the patients tried to help him. Everybody was afraid of shock treatments. If you talked with somebody on the treatment list, you might be signed up too. When the breakfast list didn't have your name, you became giddy with relief and couldn't wait to get down to the cafeteria to eat.

John was new. I met him two days before, when he came into the hospital. He walked up to me in the patients' lounge, offering me a Coke.

"May I sit down?" he asked, and then he paused while he thought something over. "I am supposed to be suicidal, homicidal, and a paranoid schizophrenic. I won't hurt you. And I really do want to talk to somebody.

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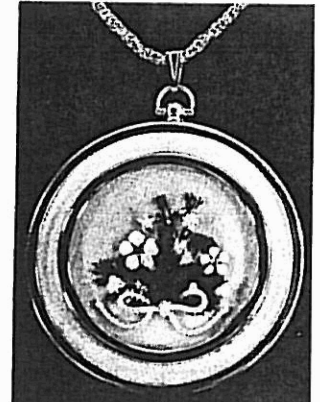
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waiting. He and Ruthann sneaking down his driveway, stealing towards the garage, passing under the kitchen window and his mother at the sink. The station wagon windows would steam up a long time before they could tear themselves away from one another. One winter night the hours flew by so fast his mother, worried he'd been mugged or worse, sent the police out looking for him by the time he made it through the front door.

"Ruthann thought I looked like Fabian," says Jerry. "That was the whole thing. It was no secret. She just fell in love with someone who looked like Fabian." Back in '58, what bobby-sockser wouldn't have?

Since the only cars they had access to were braked and parked in Jerry's garage, they walked around a lot. They walked on dates to the movies and made-out once inside. They walked to the park and kissed in mad embraces standing up or leaning on tree trunks. They walked to Traflets, the local Orange (N.J.) hangout and, like everyone else, lurched around sipping an occasional chocolate malt just for squatting rights. They put nickels in the juke box and always pushed E4 because E4 released "Barbara Ann" by the Regents. When you had a girl named Ruthann in 1958 that was the closest you were ever going to get to the disco-fame all the Susies and Dianas had. "Got me rockin' n' a rollin', rockin' and a-reeling, Ruthann." She smoked Kents while she danced.

They grew up together, but in a meet-me-at-Midnight-Mary kind of way. It wasn't that he was ashamed of her. To Jerry, Ruthann had more class than anyone. But, in the Orange, N.J., scheme of things, she was low class. Worse, as far as Jerry's parents were concerned, she wasn't Jewish. He sheltered her from them, kept her in dark shadows. His nights, as far as his parents knew, Jerry spent "out with the guys" and when Ruthann's junior prom rolled around, he couldn't (or wouldn't) take her because he would have had to borrow his father's Cadillac and questions, then suspicion, would arise.

She lived downtown. Lived in a three-flight walk-up flat in the heart of the business district. Her father was a heavy equipment operator.

"There wasn't a lot of love in the family," says Jerry, "and her parents encouraged her to get married right out of high school.

They wanted her to get out of their hair."

But, out in the suburbs, in the rambling Siegal residence with the sensible black Cadillacs in the garage, marriage was not a word to be spoken of until favorite sons had completed a number of life's other important things, like college after prep school and a suitable internship in the family business. By the time Jerry was a junior at Cornell University, Ruthann had gone through her second black leather jacket, had dyed her hair, first red, then orange, then black, then platinum and had let it grow long enough to be teased into a beehive. She was a senior at Orange, N.J.'s public high school.

"Her courtship was rather brief," says Jerry. "They met in February and got married in July as soon as Ruthann got out of high school." The day she wed, Jerry had an appendicitis attack. She told him later that she had looked for him, all during the ceremony.

"He was some low life guy," Jerry says. "It didn't last very long. I was seeing her again by the next summer." Ruthann and "low life" had separated by then and when Jerry came home from Cornell at Thanksgiving, she had gotten a divorce. "We spent the whole next summer together. I was going to Syracuse in the fall to do some graduate work and we made plans for her to come up and live with me. But, right at the end of the summer, she met some other guy and all of a sudden she didn't want to see me anymore.

"Well, she broke my heart so bad that I went up to Syracuse and I took one look around and all I could think of was Ruthann, and I said to myself, 'This is a terrible place. I don't want to go to school here.'"

It took him one hour to pack up. He flew home. Nothing mattered but Ruthann. Not Jews or gentiles, schools or parents; red hair or blond hair; tight sweaters, short skirts, cheap jewelry, black leather jackets or chewing gum. He had to have her. Let the rest go. Tempt the hand of fate.

He called her umpteen times, but she wouldn't talk to him. She had taken a job as a receptionist at a doctor's office in Newark and Jerry knew the spot where the doctor, who gave her a ride back to Orange each night, dropped her off. He put on his cowboy boots, his best faded jeans, and a Pendleton jacket. Then he drove the family station wagon down to a deserted gas station near the spot where Ruthann would be dropped off. And he waited.

"I slipped behind the doctor's car right as he was dropping her off, and I opened my car door and

said to Ruthann, 'Come on, get in.' She was too embarrassed, in front of the doctor, to make a scene, so she got in. It didn't last very long.

"We drove around the block a few times. I said, 'Look, I'm going crazy. I love you. I want to marry you. I can't live without you.' She said she didn't want to have anything to do with me. No explanation. She was going to marry some other guy she said. She told me to take her home.

"I'd arrange to see her. I got a job as a bartender where she hung out . . . as a matter of fact, at the place where she met her next husband.

"They had two bands, a typical Jersey dive, and the only reason I got the job there was to see her. She'd dance with all these hoodlums, greasy guys; and she'd see her ex-husband there and her future husband there. I was eating my liver. If you've read *Catch-22* you know what dying from an eaten liver means. Anyway, I was crazy. I got so I was devoted to Ruthann in a masochistic kind of way.

"Finally I quit, and I took a job in New York bartending, but instead of taking the train I'd make it a point to take the bus so I could ride on the same bus Ruthann did into Newark. After the bars were closed, late at night, I'd drive by her house. I knew she'd be coming home and I used to wait just to see some guy walk her up to the door."

In Jerry Siegal's bureau drawer are more than ten years' worth of letters from Ruthann, written to him at Cornell and in Washington. She didn't stay unmarried for long, but the letters kept coming.

"Now," says Jerry, "she's pretty happy with this guy. He's an official in the school system or something. Anyway, it's a respectable job."

They see each other once a year. It just works out that way. And, last year when he went up to see her it seemed a little strange to Jerry that Ruthann had a daughter. They went for a walk in the park. Ruthann's hair was short and sleek, with subtle red highlights. She wore a lovely camel's hair coat, and, as they strolled along the path, Jerry felt they could talk, now, about a number of things. They got along better than ever.

He felt sadder than usual when he left her. He had to shake hands, instead of kiss her good-

bye because her daughter was there. And he felt slightly scruffy in his worn leather motorcycle jacket. "She looked just like Judy Collins," he said. "She's a beautiful girl. Always has been."

Ruthann, in the classic camel's hair coat, still touches his life. But, it's the Ruthann with the leather jacket and the too-short skirts, who did the real channeling of his life, sending him to a young, if still pained, success as the owner of one of Capitol Hill's most popular and wealthiest pubs.

But for her, Jerry would have stuck it out at Syracuse and probably would have ended up in the family business. She lured him into the bar business in the first place, back behind the taps in Jersey; and her rejection sent him off to Washington, far from Orange.

He has flirted with matrimony, but never come close. And though Jerry doesn't know if his feelings for Ruthann will prevent him from someday marrying someone else, he says earnestly, "I'll tell you. If she got divorced and came to Washington she would definitely knock any competition out of the picture. I can tell you that . . . definitely."



## 1930s

*Normally we carried the magic desert of our love through a world from which love had disappeared. And on days like these, it seemed that the flame which rose in us when we held hands was the same one which we saw dancing in the shop windows, in the heart of the workmen who had turned around to look at their children, and in the depths of the pure and icy December sky.*

—Albert Camus, *Notebooks, 1937-39*

It was the depression. Lou Mati's family was one of the luckier ones in Brooklyn. His father owned a

*Continued on page 60*

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this place?" he asked, very matter-of-factly. I did then, and I do now, admire the resolute way in which he faced things that I simply could not bear.

It was all one horrible nightmare, as far as I was concerned. I was waiting for it to be over. I would wake up, sometime, and laugh about it, and everything would be all right again. In the meantime, I didn't want to hear anything, see anything, or think about it. It was too much for me.

Yet, here was John, trying to get control of the situation he was in. It was amazing.

"I read my record," he said. "It's in the office down the hall. They all are. If you want me to, I can go look up yours for you."

"No, please, don't!" I replied. "Just tell me about yours."

"Well my mother is going to collapse when she hears about this. She was the one who called the police. I didn't really try to hurt anybody, though."

What had he done? He was reading *Fountainhead* and thinking about Roark. He took off his clothes and walked out the front door of his house. His mother got very uptight, was horrified at what the neighbors would think. She came out after him, crying, and begging him to come in the house or to put some clothes on. I think that he told me she was carrying his clothes when she ran after him.

When he wouldn't come in, she called the police. They came and she told them that he wasn't criminal and that he really didn't "do anything wrong." She asked them to take him to the hospital, according to him, rather than to jail.

"I kept thinking how Roark said that he would ignore everything and walk down the street naked, and I tried to do the same."

Not only did he tell a realistic story, without self-pity, but he was figuring out his problems, and his life, as well. It was a puzzle to him, something that he was working on. He told me about a recent trip to New York, to get away from home and try to become a man.

"Sometimes, I would feel as though people could see how afraid I was. But they couldn't, you know. I just imagined that. I should have stayed there and tried harder. I did the wrong thing to go back home. I am in a mess now, with a bad record." And he was.

John's parents came to the hospital, and they looked just like anybody's parents. Middle-class, respectable people. They all seemed respectable people, the parents of mental patients. They all seemed ashamed, just like John's parents were. His parents were ashamed of him, ashamed of themselves, and ashamed of the hospital. I suppose that is why they signed for shock treatments. What did they expect shock treatments to do? As usual, things just keep getting worse. Respectability went out the window, that wild day, and so did common sense.

The psychiatrists, too, were jumpy about respectability. John was clearly a bad person in their minds. As a matter of fact, John was about the only one in that place who was trying to work out his problems, and wanted to grow up. Had a judge just given him a reprimand for what he did — for indecent exposure, or for disturbing the peace — and a fine, he would have learned a lesson. He would have figured out a better way. He was thinking, and he was intelligent, and you could reason with him. He was reasoning with himself.

I saw John after his shock treatment. He was on his bed, in his room, with his arms up around his head. He stopped talking to me, no longer prowled around the lounge trying to fit the puzzle together, and just gave up. He was like a zombie.

Maybe that's how some of the other people got the way they were. The man who always wore a cap and swept the floor all the time, muttering about the MGM lot. If you asked him for a match, he stopped muttering and gave you one. When you thanked him, he said, "You're welcome."

There was one woman  
*Continued on page 58*

**Shock**, from page 46 who always washed her hands, night and day, muttering about something. Maybe she had very respectable parents, and got too tangled up with them, like John did. Is this the way that John would live, then, spending his life in a mental hospital because he took off his clothes one day?

It is hard to see how John could get a good job, or go to college, or marry after that. Homicidal and suicidal are labels one does not outgrow. Nobody will ever trust him.

In the hospital near Boston, all the patients got shock treatments. We were all knocked unconscious, every morning except Sun-

day.

Escape, for those undergoing the treatments, was impossible. It was impossible because we were not allowed outside. The doors were locked and they stayed locked until the course of treatments was over. How long would it be? How many treatments? If one is a patient, one is not told. One is not asked. Your job is to endure, to live through it. To wait until it is over.

The hospital was as grim as any prison. They administered both insulin shock and electroshock. Nothing, no human feeling or tears or pleas, were allowed to interfere. This was efficiency. The place was set up to give shock treatments and that is all they did. As many as possible, as quickly as possible.

There was no recreation. There were no rules. Only two meager, unappetizing meals and a place to sleep at night. No concession to beauty, either, in the ugly surroundings there.

It looked very nice from the outside. Grass, trees, and a dignified building. Passers-by must have felt relieved to think of the poor, troubled people who were being helped inside, no doubt imagining that we were talking things over with some intelligent, compassionate expert. Nobody would believe the human misery that was there.

First was the X-ray of skull and spine. I was led into a stainless steel room, put on a stainless steel table, and had my head measured with a stainless steel caliper. My doctor, the psychiatrist

and part-owner, made one of his rare appearances that day. He did not talk to me. I was not supposed to talk or ask questions.

This strange procedure, the preliminary exam before shock treatments, ends as abruptly as it begins.

Then the shock treatments start, and they last for about three months. The nurse drives up each morning, in a car with leopard seats, and she parks efficiently. What kind of a woman is she who can look on while people suffer so? She is well paid, in any event, and has better jewelry and clothing than most nurses. She enters the room and the shock treatments begin.

We are turned around in the beds, so that our heads are at the wrong end, the

foot. Then the shock machine, and a table with needles and tubes are wheeled up. First, there is the shot of insulin. Then, the shock to your head. You are terrified. You are clammy and cold with fear. When it is too much, your feelings shut off, although your mind goes on recording events around you. The last thing that you remember is the sharp noise, the peculiar sound of the electric shock machine. Your head, your brain completes the circuit. You have a convulsion, you moan in an unnatural, animal way, and after the seizure, you go into a coma. You know this, because it happens to the others.

Hours later, you wake up. You are sweaty from the insulin, dopey and foolish. You feel as though

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you have been shut in a steam room too long, so long that you are passing out, and can no longer turn the handle to shut off the steam or open the door for fresh air. Then, you have to drink orange juice loaded with sugar to counteract the insulin and stay awake at all. It is sticky and gooey from the sugar. You cannot brush your teeth, and you drink sugary juice all day.

You turn into a semi-comatose zombie who cannot think, cannot feel, and cannot remember anything. You gain weight rapidly, and your clothes won't fasten anymore. You don't like yourself, what you are turning into. You just want the whole thing to be over. That is all that matters. You no longer care about anybody, or anything. You are no longer a human being.

Neither are the others, who sit around the tacky room half there. Mouths half-open, eyes half-closed, half-awake and half-asleep. It is an opium den without the dreams.

Finally, you do leave. Rather, you are turned out into the streets. I felt like a rat climbing out of a slimy sewer, dragging a humiliated spirit in my fat body. It took me years to recover, to feel like a human being again.

Most of the people at the hospital were, like me, very young and very gullible. None had ever done anything to anybody. I got there by going to see a doctor in a private office. I believed in Freud and all the marvelous things that psychiatry was supposed to do. I felt tired and discouraged and I wanted to feel more alert and alive.

I paid \$5,077.06 for the experience. Of this, \$3,042.06 went to the hospital and \$2,035 to the doctor. His son, he told me, was in business school; his tuition at that time was \$2,000. In money, and in suffering, I paid a terrible price and gained nothing, and yet the same shock treatments are being given today, to other young people who have been declared mentally ill, and surely that, too, is mad. ■

**Love, from page 35**  
little print shop and they lived above it in the only one-family building on the block. It was surrounded by dingy tenements, each fronted by vacant stores, tenements to hard times. The Matis had supper every night at 6 p.m. sharp, and it was no real surprise to Lou that anywhere from six to 15 people would happen to knock on his door right around that time. "Of course we would ask them to stay for dinner," he says. "My mother would always make enough spaghetti and lentils, or spaghetti and meatballs, or whatever, to feed extra people because most of the people on our block were on relief. And hungry. Starving. You knew the meaning of the word back them."

What is even more remarkable to Lou now, looking back to that bleak winter of 1935, is that he met Josephine at all. She lived two blocks away. "In Brooklyn, every block was a town in itself," he says. "And, you didn't go off your own block for anything."

He first saw her behind the counter in a candy store on her block, when at 15-years-old, he had ventured that far, looking for a friend of his. "She was just beautiful," he remembers, "and me not being exactly what you'd call handsome, I was surprised she said hello to me. Even that she spoke to me inflated my ego. She had on a sweat shirt, about two sizes too big for her. It came all the way down over her knees. So I said 'Can't you afford to buy anything that fits better than that?' and she laughed and said, 'Oh this. This is my brother's. I just wear it in the store. But, next time I'll make sure I have something better on when you come.' Well, I figured she was taking some notice of me, so I ambled around the next day, and the next, and the next..."

It was an uphill struggle. He learned soon enough that the beautiful Josephine had a boyfriend, much older and bigger and, yes, better-looking, than he. He bought a lot of jaw breakers and licorice sticks that winter. "My friends kept saying, 'don't waste your time, Lou.' But I let all that go right in one ear and out the other." He snuck out of high school early, every day, so he could meet her "accidentally on purpose" at the subway stop as she got off, coming home from parochial school. He "talked himself silly" with her.

One night, when his block's "club" was having a guest night dance, he suited up in his best

Continued on page 66