

The Presenting Problem

Alyssa Pelish

HE PRESENTS AS AN AFFABLE, even charismatic, man of forty with a profound sense of guilt that overwhelms his efforts to break off affairs.

It had become a terrible thing in his life, he said, the trepidation he felt at ending things with someone—whether it was after one night or one month. It just got harder and harder. He twisted himself in knots, procrastinating. Knowing he'd feel terrible when he finally said it, when he heard her voice, when she broke down or swore at him or, just very admirably, kept her composure. His life was always capsized for a time—dreading the task, hiding from it, and then, when he finally did break things off, recovering from the enormous sense of guilt that descended upon him.

He wrung out the word *dread*, she noticed, as if he were experiencing it as he pronounced it.

Two weeks before, the last time it'd happened, he'd sat until 2:00 a.m. in his office, not able to make the call. He'd watched old clips of World Cup soccer matches, again and again, which somehow felt soothing. That solid moment when a player emerges out of the muddle and kicks the ball into the net. When he was growing up, he said, there was an odd public-access program that used to show prerecorded soccer matches from everywhere in the world. The games had already been played, but he had never seen them. They were on most nights from midnight to two, and he would watch them, as a kid, when he couldn't sleep.

"Did you have something like that?" He paused to ask her this. He had a gaze that traveled over your face, settled on your eyes. It seemed gently, genuinely curious. "I mean, when you couldn't sleep, did you have something you'd do to distract yourself?"

She thought for a moment, about how much of herself it was useful to disclose, and then allowed that she'd sometimes pulled one of her father's old anatomy textbooks into bed with her. He had been a general surgeon, her father. She'd look at the colored plates and try to memorize the names of all the things he knew—all those systems

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and organs otherwise hidden from view. Some of them buried deep, others just below the first layer of skin.

“Aha,” he said, as if he’d found her out. He held up one hand to the lamp beside him, fingers parted, peering at it as if before an X-ray light. His dramatic frown dissolved into a sheepish smile. His eyes settled on her again. “Why were you trying to memorize them, all those systems and organs, at that age?”

She smiled, wryly. She’d done it to impress her father, of course.

“Of course,” he agreed, like he’d heard that one before. And no doubt he had, she thought. Now, though, at this moment, his very light eyes seemed to glow from the creases of his smile.

She let the moment pass.

“You were telling me about prerecorded soccer matches.” Shifting the interview back to the more immediate arena of his troubles.

His expressions of self-deprecation—the half squint, the bitten lip, or else a wonderfully exaggerated grimace—gave no sense of being well practiced, although that, she reminded herself, is just what most facial expressions are: muscle memory, the result of continual repetition. The result, in this case, made him seem vulnerable, which was somehow charming. Charming, she supposed, because he seemed so otherwise self-possessed. When someone like that shows you a crack in his armor, it feels intimate.

She asked him, after some time, how he thought therapy might help him.

He admitted that he wasn’t sure, but he wondered if she couldn’t help him figure that out.

The presenting problem was what brought a person into therapy. It was equivalent to the throbbing pain that brings you into the emergency room. But the presenting problem was just a symptom of a much larger problem, the throbbing in your fingertips that turns out to be a sign of peripheral neuropathy, a systemic condition. If you could start by palpating the presenting problem, though, it might lead you to whatever it was that lay beneath the surface.

He would try to break off a relationship, he said, when it was clear that the other person was feeling something that he wasn’t.

“Love?” she asked. He had a way of veiling certain things. It felt almost like a sense of decorum, but she wondered if it wasn’t just avoidance.

He nodded, a bit solemnly. Only, of course, he could never break

off right at that moment. There was always that long, agonizing period of purgatory.

Purgatory, she thought to herself, where all sins arise from love. Love that gets misdirected or malformed in some way. It was one of those Dantean ideas that she remembered because of its likeness to certain psychotherapeutic tenets, such as how ego defenses distort or divert an honest emotion.

She asked him how long the longest period had been.

His hand over his face. "I once bought and renovated an old farmhouse in the Hudson Valley with a woman."

"And all the while . . . ?"

He closed his eyes for a moment.

He thought he had gotten better, though, relatively speaking. Now he usually ended things after a few months. Maybe, in that respect, he'd become more self-aware. He knew, now, that it was better if he left sooner.

"And before?"

When he was younger, he'd thought he might begin to feel as they did.

"But you never did?"

He shook his head. He was apologetic.

"I wonder"—he was furrowing his shaggy brow—"what you think of all this." He watched her face.

It was part of his MO. She could see this by now: how he would turn his attention, seemingly undivided, onto her, asking her about herself, her thoughts—as if they were not in fact in a psychotherapy office but were perhaps somewhere it was possible to order a second cup of coffee, a pastry, as they whiled away the afternoon. She liked it, though, was the truth.

Carefully, she told him she felt glad he was telling her as much as he could, that she appreciated his honesty. This was a standard encouragement, not untrue, one she often gave to patients. But his disclosures felt more intimate. It was flattering to receive them. When she'd asked him why he'd decided to make an appointment with her, in particular, he'd acknowledged her therapeutic approach and specialties but then said, very simply, that she had an understanding face. He had smiled, a little sadly.

"What I'm wondering," she said to him now, "is what all this has been like for you—what it is you *do* feel."

Here he looked down at his hands, at his bare wrists. The sleeves of his oxford shirts were always rolled up at least a quarter of the

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way, and she thought of someone she'd once known, whom she described, after the fact, as wearing his heart on his sleeve but his sleeves rolled.

"Guilt." He said it softly, looked back up at her. Guilt is what he felt upon breaking it off.

It was the outsized guilt that was interesting to her. Wasn't it the ethical thing to do, she asked, *not* to continue under false pretenses? Not to continue when you realize you can't return the love another person feels for you?

But it was still a terrible feeling to have to hurt someone, wasn't it? He put the question to her.

She nodded at him. "And so you put it off."

"That's the irony, isn't it?" He could see that she saw this too. "The longer I put it off, the more hurtful it ends up being."

And that was the pattern. He would, inevitably, through the currents of erotic attraction, become entangled with a woman. He would, after a time, realize that she was in deep, while he, meanwhile, remained on the surface. And then the guilt would begin.

And the prerecorded soccer matches, she noted.

He smiled at this. Held her glance for just a tick longer than expected.

His response, when she asked him if he knew what it was he wanted from a relationship, if indeed he wanted one at all, half surprised her. But then again, it didn't. It was his earnestness, his wistfulness, after all, that compelled one. He'd like to be in love, he said. He'd like to feel committed. To be able to be completely honest.

About what? She had to ask him.

About his feelings, he said.

She waited. But she had, finally, to ask him to elaborate.

"When I obscure the fact that I don't have any," he said.

She asked if he thought he was capable of such feelings.

The dull roar of the white noise machine, outside the door, filtered into the silence like a presence they'd just become aware of.

"I don't know."

It's easy enough to mistake an absence of feeling for an inability to feel, she let him know. She looked at him, sitting right across from her, close enough that she could see the pale kiss of a birthmark on the inside of his wrist. "I suspect you have a lot of emotions," she said to him. "I think it's a matter of unearthing them."

He leaned just slightly forward, just enough that she could feel it in herself. "Then I think that's what you need to help me with," he said.

It was after he'd left the room, as she was writing her notes, that it occurred to her what he'd just done.

The therapeutic relationship was a special one, she explained to him. At the same time that it took place outside the bounds of everyday life, and was thus a safe place, it would allow the two of them to examine how the dynamics of his other relationships typically played out.

His eyes grew wide, endearingly, as if she'd just suggested they perform a craniotomy together.

How did that sound to him, she asked.

Intimidating, he confessed. But he trusted her.

There sometimes bloomed an impish smile on his face when she called him into her office, as he navigated past the white noise machine and the soothing abstract prints on the waiting-room walls, toward the designated armchair, as if they were a conspiracy of two. She would have liked to have given him a knowing look in return. There would have been an undeniable pleasure in it, in being part of his conspiracy. She used to think that was what true love was: a private island of winks and nudges and secret handshakes that no one else could quite decipher the coordinates or choreography of.

What she knew was that, even though he wouldn't necessarily tell her so himself, not straightaway, his way with her was very likely a mirror of how he was with most women. She wouldn't ever be able to observe him as a third person, from the other side of that mirror, but she would be able to see uncannily well from the seat closest to him. This gave her a certain sense of security, to have resources that he did not.

In truth, it wasn't difficult for her to see how his typical entanglements began. So she asked him—after another such entrance, after another pun he couldn't help finding, teasingly, in a term of art she used—if he had given any thought to it. Why did he think it was that women fell for him so readily, why was it they so often fell in so deep?

A look of exaggerated bewilderment. Then a knuckle to his lips, as if he really were thinking about it.

She waited. From her armchair, she had a view of the scaffolding that enmeshed the building across the street. She couldn't now remember when it had first gone up. It had begun to feel like a permanent feature.

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"I'm not sure," he finally said.

She looked back at him, waited for him to say more.

He waited as well.

Faint lines fanned out from the corners of his eyes.

After a moment, she said, "Not sure at all?"

He shook his head, apologetic, then paused.

"There's a lilt that comes into your voice sometimes." He narrowed his eyes, as if he were trying to discern the pitch. "It seems like a Southern lilt. Is that right?"

She granted him this. "East of the Smokies."

It was a simple enough trick, to notice the trace of an accent in someone's voice and guess at where they're from. Not only are you being noticed, but something about your past, what shaped you, is being divined. It was a small thing, an easy enough gesture. But she could feel how it worked on her.

"Is it fog or is it smoke?" he asked her. As if this were the puzzle he wanted to solve right now. But his eyes were on her. It was she he was appealing to for the answer.

"It's actually a mist," she said, "generated by the vegetation within the mountains exhaling volatile organic compounds."

"That's amazing," he said, almost like a little kid. "Is that one of those facts you know because it's part of the Smoky Mountains school district's core curriculum—like how every kid growing up on the Oregon Coast learns in eighth grade that the glowing sand along the shore isn't fallen stars but bioluminescent phytoplankton?" He smiled at her as if he were recalling something they'd both experienced. It felt like they had. "Do you remember when you learned that it wasn't actually smoke?"

She caught herself before answering again in the easy, intimate way he invited, in the easy, intimate way he seemed to be inviting her to. She stared, momentarily, at the bare wall behind his head, as if she had just noticed it. Countertransference, she knew, did not have to be a problem. It could in fact be the key to the patient's unconscious. The feelings the patient stirred up in the therapist could be an opportunity for the patient to recognize the effects of his behavior and thus live out an experience unlike the one he felt otherwise doomed to repeat. The trick was for the therapist to have a firm grip on her feelings of countertransference. As a former supervisor of hers was fond of saying, "Countertransference is the best of servants but the worst of masters."

She'd noticed, she told him, that he had a tendency to deflect

attention from himself. "Which is a bit of a trick to pull off," she said, "given that the whole point of therapy is to focus on *you*."

His face melted into that wonderfully sheepish grin of his, half *mea culpa*, half inveiglement, as if to begin the trick again, however unwittingly.

It was true, he said, that he wasn't used to speaking at length about himself.

He seemed to think about it for a moment.

It didn't feel like a need he'd ever had. The ratio of talking to listening he was used to, he said, was probably something like thirty to seventy. "But here, with you"—his look of comic consternation—"it's flipped. It's probably more like eighty-twenty, or ninety-ten."

She asked him if he knew why it was that he preferred listening to other people over talking about himself. For most people, it was the opposite, wasn't it? Most people wanted to be listened to.

He said he didn't mind talking about himself. He just didn't feel a strong need to.

"But you've come into therapy."

The furrowed brow, a touch theatrical. "That's true."

She waited for him to turn over this seeming contradiction in his mind, to recognize that maybe he did need to talk about himself.

He continued to look back at her. She hazarded, internally, that it might be the combination of the limpid eyes and heavy brow that gave the gaze such seeming depth.

"There can be a sense of power," she said, circumspectly, "in being the one who asks the questions. In getting other people to talk. It certainly puts one in the less vulnerable position."

He smiled at her. "I imagine you might know a thing or two about that."

She met his smile. "And what about you?"

He allowed that he might.

She waited for him to say more.

"I don't know if I'm allowed to ask but"—the look of gentle curiosity—"how was it you became a therapist—instead of a surgeon? You must have thought about becoming one." His face was working, like he was trying to figure something out about her. "All those nights spent trying to memorize the systems and organs in your father's anatomy book."

She suddenly remembered that she'd mentioned the anatomy book to him, her childhood preoccupation with identifying the complex structures beating just beneath the skin. It had been a while

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since she'd told him. But he remembered.

"That," she finally said, "is something of a long story. But I'm wondering"—the security in psychotherapeutic jujitsu—"what makes you ask?"

His eyes moved over her face for a moment. "It just seemed odd, all of a sudden, sitting here in this intimate way and not knowing anything more about how, in a sense, you came to be sitting across from me, in this particular position." He smiled gently. "Clearly, instead of becoming a surgeon like your father, you became a psychotherapist. But as you say, there's more to the story than that."

"There is," she allowed. If they'd been anywhere else, in that place with the coffee and the pastries, she would have told him the whole story. He seemed—he always *seemed*—to want to know. But it was just deflection. She thought of the shield that sprightly Greek hero had used to protect himself against the gaze of Medusa. Freud's theory was that it was about the fear of looking, though it struck her then as more about a fear of being looked at. The shield as a radiation vest against X-ray light.

It seemed to her a good moment to ask him more about *his* parents. So far, he'd said only the bare minimum. What had his relationship with them been like?

"Ah." His wry smile. "It always comes back to our parents, does it?"

She asked him what he thought.

His eyes, as they sometimes did, seemed to be traveling over the far wall. She'd hung a single framed photograph there. It was a black-and-white shot of the Largo di Torre Argentina, one of those sites in Rome where medieval towers and Renaissance palaces and modern pastel apartment houses had grown up around the ancient foundations and pillars and plinths of the Republic. Freud had discarded the analogy almost as soon as he theorized it, but she liked thinking of the historically jumbled Roman cityscape as akin to the layers of the human mind, one developing out of another. The conscious mind out of the preconscious out of the unconscious. The superego out of the ego out of the id. And thus the preservation of our earliest feelings and impulses in the deepest layers, all of them within reach. That if you were to dig deep enough beneath the Coliseum, you could indeed find Nero's Golden House. And beneath Hadrian's Pantheon, the original edifice of Agrippa. The sixth-century BC Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus beneath the sixteenth-century Palazzo Caffarelli. The fences of the earliest city within the bounds of the Servian walls

within those of the Aurelian walls. It was all there. It just required excavation. And what you could excavate, you could, potentially, change.

"My mom committed suicide when I was thirteen, going on fourteen," he said. "My father never remarried. He retired to southern Florida a while back. He fishes a lot." A plain nod, as if to himself. "He always fished a lot."

He spoke fairly evenly. *This happened a long time ago*, his voice said. She wondered, though not aloud, if he was angry that he'd had to tell her. He had dropped the facts so bluntly in her lap. He had, though, dropped them there.

They both seemed to listen, for a moment, to the steady sound of the white noise machine. Sometimes it sounded like a rushing river to her, sometimes like static.

She asked him if he'd been close to his mom.

"I think that's a way of putting it, yeah."

"Would you put it a different way?"

He was the youngest, he said. By a lot. His earliest memories were all of her, being cuddled, nuzzled. In fact, he had no memories from that time of being left alone. "My dad, for so long, called me her security blanket."

"Why do you think she needed a security blanket?"

"I don't know, not exactly. She was very unhappy. She didn't seem to want to be alone." His father was out of the house a lot—at work, gone fishing. "And she had me." He had early, fuzzy memories of being urged to give her a kiss or a hug, to come cuddle.

"So you did."

"She would be . . . upset if I didn't. I think I could feel that even then, as a really small child. How she didn't want me to let go of her hand when we were out of the house, like she was afraid I'd leave her." She was always demanding his attention, asking him to sing for her, *My Bonnie lies over the ocean*, to come cuddle, *My Bonnie lies over the sea*, to stay by her side.

His gaze drifted from her, as he spoke. And this, she thought, was good. It meant he wasn't performing.

"What about when you got older?"

He nodded.

Midway through grade school, he said, he started feeling embarrassed—all of her kissing and cuddling in public. But she was hurt, he could tell she was hurt, the few times he could remember pulling away. He felt awful, making her cry. He would hug her to make her

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feel better. She smelled of the house, he remembered. Homey. Like how shells he picked up on the shore still smelled of the ocean. The house was where she spent most of her time.

He looked at the far wall as he spoke.

"It began to feel like I was the only one there to protect her, to keep her from being sad. Or at least from falling completely apart. She was so fragile." Often he found her crying, and only his attentions could soothe her. He would take care of her: hug her, kiss her, hold her hand, sing to her. *Bring back my Bonnie to me*. Sometimes she would have been drinking, and he would put the bottle of rum away (she said it reminded her of the smell of Christmas when she was a girl) and rinse out the glass she'd been drinking from and fill it with water instead. He would make her tea, those herbal packets that smelled like faded flowers.

She listened without interrupting him, hardly prompting him, amazed that he was telling her so much. It was hard to discern just what he felt as he spoke, but—she told herself—he trusted her enough to tell her.

He learned, he said, not to tell his mom anything that might upset her. So he told her only about pleasant things—the sun lighting up a lawn full of dandelions gone to seed, the rainbow he'd seen in an oil slick. Or else he just made things up—things he knew she'd like. He learned to ask her the right questions about when she was a girl and lived in the best place on earth, the Utah Canyonlands, where her dad, when he was still alive, would take her out riding beneath the walls of rock that looked like a solid sunset. It made her happier to remember those times.

"You created a shield of happiness for her."

He smiled at her, a little sadly. "You have a nice way of putting things."

"I was recalling," she said, "what you told me about being your mom's protector."

"Ah," he said. "You're right."

"Do you remember," she asked, "some of the things you *couldn't* tell her?"

"Well"—he gave her one of his looks—"anything that wasn't pleasant."

"And what were some of those things?"

"Pretty normal kid things, I think."

"General amnesia is often a pretty good defense mechanism," she said to him.

He half squinted at her, as if to suggest he couldn't make out her meaning.

It had begun to rain softly outside, and they both glanced out the window. There was nothing in particular to see, she thought, just a way of acknowledging the sound.

She asked him if other kids ever gave him a hard time for spending so much time with his mom.

They did, he conceded.

She waited.

They watched one another. They were close to something, she felt.

"Ah," he said. "You're waiting for me to elaborate."

"Is it hard to talk about?"

He considered. Well, it wasn't pleasant.

"Not like dandelion fluff or rainbows," she said.

"No," he said. His voice was brusque, not playful, and that was a good sign. It meant he was telling her things he found difficult to say.

But really, he said, and he seemed to be trying for equanimity, it wasn't surprising that a boy who was still holding his mom's hand in public would be mocked for being a mama's boy. He seemed to be trying to look at it matter-of-factly. Shoved and tripped and called a homo. It was about what you'd expect.

"But that didn't make it pleasant."

"No."

"If you couldn't tell your mom, was there anyone you *could* tell?"

There didn't seem to be, he said.

"Do you think"—she was careful with this next question—"that you ever resented her?"

"I'm sure I did." But he also was increasingly aware of her fragility and her need for his protection. She was drinking more, some days not getting out of bed.

"What did it feel like you were protecting her from?"

"I don't know. She just always seemed on the verge of falling to pieces." He had this memory of a Christmas-tree ornament, a delicate glass star that he'd accidentally broken one year when he was maybe eight or nine. How he'd had to press forever on each different segment he'd reattached with Krazy Glue, to make sure it'd hold.

"And did it?" It was such a telling detail to remember.

He shook his head. "It eventually just fell apart."

"Were you blamed for it?"

That momentary amusement just behind his eyes. "No, no. Nobody knew I'd broken it in the first place."

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He watched her for a moment, as she watched him. He seemed to be waiting for her to carry on her investigation of the analogy.

The rain was steady enough now to drown out the white noise machine.

"What did you feel," she asked, "when you found out she had taken her own life?"

"That's an odd expression, isn't it? *To take one's own life.*"

"What seems odd about it?"

He thought about it. "As if it hadn't belonged to her in the first place."

"Did it seem as if it had?"

"Who else would her life belong to?" As soon as he asked the question, he shrugged it off. "God, I suppose."

He had been the one who found her, after school one day. He'd dawdled getting home, had biked over to the shoreline first. It was something he'd started to do that year, now that he was old enough. It was a longish ride. Had she ever seen the Oregon Coast in the spring? Such thick, puffy clouds that caught the sunlight, reflected all its colors. The sea foam like clouds fallen to the shore—it was as if you were on another planet. And hardly anybody there at all. It was so beautiful it almost hurt to look at it. He hadn't been back in ages, but sometimes he dreamed of it.

"What are the dreams like?"

"Quiet and calm," he said. "Most of the time."

"And the rest of the time?"

His voice was a shrug. "Less quiet, less calm."

She asked him how it was that he'd found his mother.

"In her bed." He frowned. When he'd finally gotten home and couldn't find her anywhere else. For once, she wasn't looking for him. Her strangely frozen face. How he'd tried to remember what he'd once learned about taking another person's pulse. Something about not using your thumb, so as not to confuse your own pulse with theirs.

Again, she asked him for the part he wasn't saying: how had he felt?

He seemed to be studying the far wall again. She wondered if it was the photo he was looking at.

"I think I just felt numb." He glanced at her, as if to see whether this was an acceptable answer.

She remained steady in her chair, aware of her own silent breathing. She hadn't thought that he would, this early on, tell her so much about a relationship that was so clearly formative. As a patient, he presented as what was called "high functioning," in that he was personable and

thoughtful, engaged readily in conversation. He ticked all the boxes in the textbook. But these qualities had turned out to be an elegant means of resistance. He took an interest in her in order to avoid taking an interest in himself. She had been expecting it, then, to take more work, more time—but now he had led her right to the heart of his problem, the broken star of his primary object choice. Had she, then, inspired trust in him? It was a question, she warned herself, that was useful only from a therapeutic perspective, not a personal one.

“What did it feel like,” she asked, after a while, “to tell me all that?”

He considered. “A little strange.”

“How so?”

“It’s not a story I’m used to telling.”

“How much of it have you told before?”

“Not much. Tiny bits have come out here and there. Someone you’re seeing finds out your mother died when you were young, so you have to give them something.”

She could feel her face trying not to react. “Did you feel, as you were telling me, that you were *giving* me something? Like I had asked something of you that you just had to ante up?”

He thought this over. “Well, you did *ask*.”

“I did.” He was being honest about not wanting to be honest. It would be good to continue on this tack. “And that’s how it feels to you, that sense of *anteing* up, when someone you’re seeing asks you to divulge some part of yourself?”

He nodded.

“If telling it,” she said, “isn’t particularly emotional for you, why would you rather not?”

She watched him think, two fingers pressing at his temple.

“I think it’s because *they* see it as my sharing something intimate with them. But it’s not.”

“And why is that a problem?”

“Because . . . because it makes them feel closer to me.”

“And does it make *you* feel closer to *them*?”

“No.”

“Ah. So then, what it brings you closer to is their developing feelings for you and your having to break things off.”

He seemed apologetic. “That seems about right.”

The rain having slowed, on the other side of her office door the white noise rushed along.

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She wanted him to remember, she said, that the therapeutic relationship was a safe place. What happened between the two of them could reflect the dynamic of his other relationships, but it also allowed the two of them to examine that dynamic—and thus, potentially, to change it.

He gave her one of his long looks—everything seemed to occur in those looks, she thought—and the two of them agreed.

She believed that she had special insight into his case because she had, for so many years, been the unfortunate woman in the two-step he kept repeating. Her insight, though, came not from her own continual repetition of the same steps, but because she had stopped. She had put her finger on her own reflexive movement, anatomized the muscle memory of it, and learned how to move in a different way—how to form a lasting relationship with a man who wasn't perpetually taking half a step toward her and then two steps back. Out of that trust had come a child, on whom their attentions now converged. It wasn't that she was now entirely immune to this man's deflative arts of seduction—the little attentions paid to her that seemed everything in the moment but were in fact nothing on the whole—but she recognized them and thus could, from her vantage point as his therapist, defuse them.

It was unmistakable that his ambivalent relationship with his mother and his guilt over her death led to the same doomed dynamic between him and other women, over and over. She wasn't surprised, when she nudged at it in the next session, that the idea had occurred to him as well. He sat there, with his stark blue gaze, in his jeans and his faded oxford, the sleeves always rolled, and he knew, essentially, what his problem was. He didn't, unlike so many patients, need help discovering the most obvious pattern in his life. What he needed help with was not repeating it.

He had mistaken his emotional numbness for emptiness, she observed. But numbness wasn't an absence of feeling. It was a response to an overwhelm of feeling. Numbness was a defense mechanism, a means of coping. It was building up walls and icing them over.

"What I heard you say," she said to him, relying at first on the cotton batting of ready-made therapy phrases, "is that, as a child, you had all sorts of emotions that weren't acceptable for you to express.

You had to surround your mother with only pleasant things, tend only to her concerns. There was no place for your emotions to go—you had no place to put them. So you numbed yourself. And you got so good at doing it that you eventually convinced yourself you were just empty inside, incapable of feeling anything.”

He was listening as one does when receiving a diagnosis.

The idea was to unearth those emotions, to thaw him out. And they couldn’t do that, she told him, without holding his feet to the fire.

He expressed mild disappointment that there would be no Saint Bernard bearing a tiny barrel of brandy. But he was listening.

What she was asking him to do was return to some of those feelings that he’d buried and numbed himself to. In the present as well as the past. But he wouldn’t be making a detached, intellectual connection, she told him. He would feel it.

A charming expression of skepticism passed over his face, as if she’d just invited him to a séance.

But he agreed. He wanted to try.

He described to her decades-old matches between Chile and France, Belgium and China, games that he might have watched on TV as a kid, after the fact even then. The players in primary colors, dotting the green, green expanse of the field. The continual, soothing roar of the crowd. The hypnotic movement of the players and the ball, back and forth, over and over.

Watching from his desk, the glow from his screen the only light in his office. The door closed, everyone else long gone home. Slouching in his seat, arms folded to his chest, almost mesmerized by the repetitive motion of the small figures before him.

His calm, though, is continually invaded by the thought that he has to call her, has to tell her. Dreading it. Even if he doesn’t see her face—just the sound of her voice. He has sensed, as he always does, just in her eyes, in the way she looks at him, says his name, that she is on the verge. She received a terrible blow the other week, a great disappointment, and he comforted her—held her, sat with her till all hours, bathed her, fed her, even sang to her.

“I sometimes have this sense,” he said now, “that I have packed up my feelings into a very small safe and stored them in an entirely different room than the one I’m living in.”

She asked him to say more about that.

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But he returned to the scene he'd been recounting. How then . . . she looks up at him and says how lucky she is, how lucky she is to have him. Which is when he knows. The rest of the night is terrible. Nor can he tell her the next day, or the next. She's too fragile. He lets another week pass, swallowing it.

And tonight, now, after not calling her for days, he sits and grits his teeth in his darkened office. He dreads the hurt in her voice. Or worse, how she might hurt herself. He is filled with dread.

He sat forward as he recalled this, forearms tensed upon his knees, as though to brace himself. He looked mostly at the floor, and that was good, because it meant he wasn't performing for her.

He was, when she asked him, able to find something resembling those emotions, like the source of an echo, in a much earlier memory. Soccer again on the screen, this time in the darkened living room of his childhood, everyone else gone to bed. He's curled up, hunched over, clutching a scratchy wool blanket around himself, as close as possible to the wood-paneled TV, sound low, watching the bright colors of the players move steadily over the green field, back and forth, back and forth, always the dull roar of the crowd.

How after school they'd trapped him and pulled him into a stall in the basement bathroom, shoving his head in the bowl of the toilet again and again, calling him a mama's boy, making horrible smooching sounds, saying he's a mother fucker. The cold, foul-smelling water on his head, over his tightly shut eyes, sloshing into his nose and onto his closed lips. How he was dripping with that foul water when they finally left him, and he did not know what to do. Telling a teacher would only make it worse. How he finally pulled himself up to the sink and tried to rinse the foul water away with clean water, with that horrid pink soap that drips out of those round dispensers, to pat himself dry with those brittle paper towels.

She watched the softly stubbled back of his head, bent forward as it was, the nape of his neck incidentally exposed. He looked a bit, she thought, like a diver about to submerge himself.

And his mother, he remembered, when he gets home, her eyes sad, her whole face sad, the sweet stink of rum on her: *Come here, come here*. Holding out her arms like tentacles. *Tell me something good*. How he swallows down the bad things and puts his arms around her and makes up nice things about his day. A winning goal on the soccer field, a monarch butterfly that hovered near him for all of recess. He

feels black and blue inside, but hearing her voice, seeing her sad face, he keeps it all down. She is always on the verge of tears, her eyes such a watery blue. He swallows down the black and blue and asks her to tell him about riding horseback through the canyons as a girl. The little horse named Sonny, the echo of his hooves. And she begins to rhapsodize, her voice slowly rising and falling, until she all but lulls herself to sleep.

And now it's late, after midnight, and he sits wrapped in a blanket, watching a soccer match that already happened somewhere else, watching the players move back and forth across the field, over and over.

"What are you feeling?" she asked.

His head was still down, as if he were looking into a well. It took a few moments before he said anything. But then he did, slow and hesitant, his voice not quite cracking.

It was awful and wonderful, she thought. These were feelings he had never told anyone else. Of course she was used to patients telling her what they hadn't ever before been able to say aloud. This felt different, though.

For just a minute, the white noise machine outside the door stopped, inexplicably, and she became conscious of her own breathing, the faint shudder of it in her chest, and then, just as inexplicably, the machine started up again, the soft static rushed on, and she returned to her thoughts.

On the afternoon that she asked him to recollect his earliest feelings about his mother's suicide, he was silent for a time. The white noise machine roared softly, and she waited. She thought of the prerecorded soccer matches and wondered what recordings, what ancient reels of Super 8, blued and cracked and dusty, he might be unearthing.

He'd dawdled too long and too often after school, he said, his voice low. He'd resented her, secretly—but she could tell. He'd hurt her, irrecoverably. And every night, every night, his mind aching, he'd watch the tiny figures on the field move back and forth, the ball kicked from one side to the other, games that had already played out somewhere in the world—England, South Korea, Mexico—but whose outcome he didn't yet know.

She thought then about how guilt is sometimes classified as a sad emotion, shelved in the diagnostic library alongside agony and grief and loneliness. Pervasive guilt, like melancholy, tethered a person to

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the past, made it hard to live beyond that past. The important thing was to get him to remember the initial experience instead of endlessly, mindlessly reenacting it.

He was still there, watching the recordings, sitting in the dark.

Now was the chance for revision. What could have helped him? she asked. Who could have helped him when he was in that state? She wanted him to sight his own life raft and float it out to himself. How could it have been different, who could he have told, who would have listened?

But he had no answer, had no idea. Who on earth could he have gone to?

He shook his head slowly, head still down, as if he was just confirming the impossibility of an answer.

And then, finally, he looked up at her. "You. You could have helped me." His eyes lightening. "You're the only one I can imagine telling these things to."

She had of course, from the beginning, been aware of her own propensity to be seduced by the attentions of someone like him. The tricky thing about him, though, was that he played according to a slightly different rulebook than the one she'd grown up on. With him, as opposed to the charming but aloof figures of her erotic past, she never felt that she had to *earn* his attentions, the light of his approval, his appreciation. He gave it all freely. Happily—it seemed. But she knew that this delighted show of appreciation reflected no corresponding emotions behind it. He had told her himself. His genuine appreciation was, then, just as hard to earn as that of all the others. Or maybe harder, since it was so easy to be fooled into feeling that you'd already earned it. Slightly different rules, yes, but same deck of cards.

She could see all this, reflect on it for several pages of self-analysis. Insight, though, was the great conjuring trick of therapy.

As he showed her more and more of himself in therapy, the minute hand of the hour never quite completing its circuit before each week's appointment came to a close, she was, she thought, appropriately wary of her own emotions. She was also conscious of her role. His first object choice, the mother he had reached for in his earliest days, hadn't survived the difficulty of his emotions, the dark tangle beneath the knee-melting sweetness and waggish gallantry, and so he was forever stifling his emotions with one woman after another,

dreading the inevitable moment when he would hurt her. As his therapist, she needed to show him that she wouldn't break, that she wouldn't shatter when he showed her whatever blue-black knot was inside him. In other words, she needed to prove to him that she was the exception to the rule.

Therein lay the danger. Or the trap, more precisely. The trap she was, even after so many years and so much work, still capable of setting for herself. (What was it Beatrice said to Benedick? *I know you of old*. Yet she fell for him all the same.) The problem had always inhered in her wanting to be the exception, the silver star atop the tree. A not uncommon problem, ironically. In truth, though, she knew that the best thing she could do for him was to help him see that she wasn't in fact the exception—that he could be emotionally honest with other people as well. That was her conscientious intention. It's what she, as his therapist, wanted for him.

And yet. She couldn't help feeling flattered. Special. She was the one who was getting him to open up. Each Wednesday he came in and sat across from her and divulged to her, and only her, what he had dreamed, what difficult thing he'd remembered, what he'd been able to feel, to even say to himself, that morning. That window of time in the middle of the afternoon, like a period when you play hooky from the rest of the world, was theirs.

His smile would emerge from the creases of his concentration. "What is it you've done to me?" he would say. "I never expected"—hand to his mouth—"to be able to say any of this, to be able to tell anyone."

She would remind him of the considerable work *he* had done, all of the excavation, the self-examination, the honesty it took. And dedication: as cold April turned into drizzly May turned into mild June turned into the heat of July, he never missed an appointment. He was there, every Wednesday at three, waiting for her to call him in. He had decided as well—they had talked about it—that during the course of their work together he would stop his habitual seductions, catch himself each time he felt himself—at a bar or café, on a flight or a train, at a concert, in the park—falling into the grooves of that well-worn route that led him, inevitably, to the moment he dreaded. There had been a moment, he'd confessed to her in June, when he'd almost fallen back into it, a night when he'd almost gone home with someone. But he'd recalled their time together, everything they'd talked about here in this room, and realized it wasn't what he wanted, that he'd never wanted that. He would return to a

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different version of that world, in good time, no longer laying traps for himself but capable of building a foundation.

Of course it pleased her, his delight in whatever small powers she possessed. He marveled at them, and so she did too. She was changing him. She was, bit by bit, helping him grow out of the ruins he lived in.

He dreamed, one night, of a tide pool. He used to go mucking about in tide pools all the time as a teenager, crouching over these isolated pockets of seawater along the rockiest parts of the coast. "The tide washes in," he told her, "the tides washes out, and pools of seawater are stuck in these rocky kind of depressions." In the dream were the jumble of creatures that fill up a tide pool—fleshy starfish, hermit crabs burrowed deep into their spiral shells, the deep blue-green of iridescent seaweed, squishy-skirted sea anemones. It was beautiful, glittering and bright, but he felt anxious, like something was looming in the damp air. And, after he'd watched the tide go out, he realized he couldn't lift his feet. He was stuck, as he'd somehow known he would be, in the muck of the tide pool.

He admitted it was a transparent dream—the glittering, beautiful, fleshy creatures, the hermit crab, the entrapment—a scenario scripted and stage-managed by the same old crew. But something in him had changed, he told her, and here he caught her eye. After he'd awoken from the dream, his mind still running through different exit strategies, he lay there in bed and imagined that he could wiggle his toes, could in fact move his feet freely. He could lift his feet up, shake off the clinging seaweed, and step away if he wanted. He could also, it occurred to him, just as he had this thought, stay a little longer and just appreciate the feel of the muck on his feet, the soft and shimmering life all around him.

His whole face had lightened, in a way that always made her think of sunlight on the surface of the sea. He said he couldn't remember ever having reimagined a dream in that way. "They used to be just these visions, this muddle of anxiety that would well up in me, and the most I could do was try not to think about them."

"And now"—she tried to temper her elation—"you're recognizing them for what they are, and rewriting them."

He was so near the goal. If he could do that with dreams and in therapy, he could learn to do it in his everyday life.

The light was still in his face. "You're amazing." His eyes seemed

limpid, faultless, as if she could see all the way to his many-chambered heart. *Amazing*, he repeated.

She protested, delighted. "No, no, *you're* the amazing one." As if they were two children splashing water at each other in a sunny pool.

She felt very close to him then.

She hadn't expected to hear his voice among the recorded messages. Patients called to renew a prescription, schedule an appointment, or cancel an appointment. None of those categories applied to him: he was penciled into Wednesdays at three for the foreseeable future.

The cancellation, he said, was due to a scheduling mix-up. Another meeting had somehow worked its way onto his calendar. He was sorry about that. His kind, honest voice. He looked forward to next week. She tried not to think much of it. But it was so unlike him, so unlike him to miss one of their meetings, and so deflating to hear his voice in the smudgy distance of a recorded message. It stuck like a thorn in her foot, and she felt as if she were limping for the rest of the day.

He was back, though, the next week. There in her waiting room, there in her office. She had never, she realized, been so glad to see him. The clear gaze, the rolled sleeves. The faces he would pull, which she knew well by now, were tempered by honest answers to her questions.

It had felt strange not to see her last week, he said. And this was reassuring to her. She asked him to tell her more about what he had felt.

A friend was in town unexpectedly, he explained the next week, in his next voice message. He didn't like missing another session, he felt terrible. But he also couldn't see giving up this brief window of time he had to spend with an old friend who likely wouldn't pass this way again for some years.

In the window of time that was otherwise theirs, from three to 3:50, she tried rereading Freud's description of the hypothetical plan of Rome, where every ancient city wall and temple can be recovered and thus analyzed, the materials and forms of its modern architecture seen in context and made sense of. She had always found it beautiful, and reassuring. But mostly, as the white noise machine

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rushed on endlessly in the waiting room, she found herself staring out the window, the small figures on the street moving endlessly as well, each one, as it moved out of the frame, replaced by another, which would then itself be replaced by another.

In clinical theory, she reflected, as she watched the street, there was a faint trend toward removing “counter” from the term “countertransference” and simply calling it “transference.” That is, acknowledging that the emotions arising from the therapist are not essentially different from the patient’s own projections, and not necessarily in direct response—as if countertransference were a move in a chess game—to the patient’s transference. She wondered about this sometimes, the degree to which it mattered who moved first. Did it matter if in fact we’ve learned to play our roles, over and over, in response to a cue that already exists within us?

It was the third week of August, the days blowsy with heat and humidity, when she received another message from him. It was time-stamped around 1:00 a.m. He was very sorry. He thanked her, kindly, almost sadly, for everything she had done for him. But he was sorry. He had, finally, to tell her: it just wasn’t working.