

Saralee Perel

Raw Nerves

Monday, 7 AM

My name is Sophie Green.

I worry a lot.

I am an obsessive compulsive hypochondriac, with occasional bouts of panic attacks and binge eating.

I am also a psychiatrist.

My current list of worries includes, but is not limited to: death, senility, my teeth grinding, and the disconcerting fact that one of my patients has a husband who is very unhappy with me. And I think he's a stalker.

It's not easy being a shrink. Patients often act out their inner desires with their therapist. Usually this means that someone is either in love with me or thinks that I'm like one of their parents. This is called transference.

Every one of my therapist pals has had a patient or two that's scared them. I never did, but now I do. I keep telling myself that dealing

with crazy-acting people goes along with the profession in the first place. But believe me, this positive self-talk does not make me feel any better.

My mother always warned me about this kind of thing. Of course, she also warned me about bacterial infections from not changing my toothbrush every month. I'm too old to blame my mother for my bugaboos, but it's just so convenient. "Never say everything's fine!" she'd say. "God will notice and then you're really going to get it."

My poor husband Dan. He hates my job. He always worried that some nut will do something to me. Of course, he's been right to worry.

We have a fifteen-year-old daughter named Robin. She's not like Dan, with his zest for life and his "contentment is the realization of how much you already have" shtick. She doesn't possess my melodramatic sense and my, shall we say, eccentricities.

As a matter of fact, for the past year or so, Robin has been quiet. Too quiet for me. It's probably just normal adolescent development, which is an oxymoron if I ever heard one – you know, like a jumbo shrimp. She's a smart girl, and that's not just a prejudiced mother talking. I often worry that her high IQ causes her problems, since our culture still tells us that "smart girls aren't as much fun." But lately, she's been getting awfully thin. And I seem to be making up for her nutritional deficiencies by going in the opposite direction.

The knock on the door was not doing all that much for my nerves, not that my nerves are intact under normal circumstances, whatever that may be.

“Who’s there?” I looked out the peephole, but just saw black.

“Mrs. Green? I have a delivery for Doctor Green.”

“I’m Doctor Green. Please leave whatever you have outside the door.” I turned my head and yelled to nobody, “Dan, there’s a package at the door.”

After I heard a van door slide closed, I crept to the peephole again. I never feel sure that the person on the other side couldn’t just put his eye to the glass and see me, or rather my eye.

I didn’t see anything.

Slowly, I opened the door. There was a bouquet of gorgeous dark red roses on the stoop. I bent down and picked it up. A note fell out. That sweetheart of a husband I’ve got is always doing marvelous things like this. I wish that I was even half as thoughtful as Dan.

I picked up the note. It was typed. It read, “I could have made the brakes fail.”

*Jesus.*

I saw that the van was now way down the street, but I could still make out that it said Cape Cod Bouquets on the side.

I called information and got their number.

“This is Doctor Sophie Green calling.”

**“Yes, Doctor Green. Can I help you?”**

**“A bouquet of roses was just delivered to my house, and I’m wondering if you could tell me who sent it?” Oh, if only it would be this easy.**

**“One moment please, and I’ll see what I can find out. Was there a problem with the delivery?”**

**“No.” I held while he went to check it out.**

**“I’m sorry, Doctor Green. We received payment for them in cash in an envelope with the order request. I just checked with my partner.”**

**“Didn’t you think the note was a little strange?”**

**“Well, we never saw the note. It came with the order form, and the envelope was already sealed.”**

**“May I speak to your partner please?”**

**“Of course.”**

**A different voice said, “Was there something wrong with the delivery?”**

**“No, there was something wrong with the note, and I didn’t get your name.”**

**Just because they weren’t being helpful was no reason for me to act so surly.**

“It’s Gerry.” I decided to let the last name go. I could always get it another time.

“Gerry, “ I softened my voice, “when did you receive the note? Was it sent to the store, or just left there?”

“We got it yesterday, in the mail. I threw out the envelope it came in, and I don’t remember if there was a return address or not.”

I got off the phone with no more useful information than I had before I called. I stuffed the roses in the trash, but I kept the note. Oh man, did this give me the creeps.

It was almost eight, and I had to get ready for work, which included breakfast, of course. Today, I was supposed to begin a weight loss plan. Not that yesterday I wasn’t. Now, which diet was it going to be this time? High protein or high carbohydrate? I looked through the kitchen cabinets and decided to test the theory that I could lose twice as much weight if I went heavy on both.

While I was preparing to comfort myself with three eggs, the phone rang.

“Hello, Sophie.”

I was scrambling them in real butter. To delay an arterial revolt, the accompanying sausages were made of turkey.

“Hi, ma.”

“I hope I’m not interrupting something important. If I am, you can call me back later when you can find the time.”

“Actually . . . ” I held the phone on my shoulder while I scrambled, “I’m in the middle of making breakfast. How about if I call you in an hour or so?”

“I may not be around then.”

The eggs were beginning to lose their bright yellow color. This was not going to be a good day.

“Where are you going?”

“What’s the difference where I’m going, as long as it’s away from your father?”

The brown crust covering the eggs resembled a street map of New York City. I turned off the burner.

Now, mothers always get a raw deal when it comes to parent blaming, but who else is going to get it? Dads of my generation were generally only weekend parents, and sometimes not even that.

“Mother, please. Could you just tell me what the problem is?”

I hadn’t even gotten out of my nightshirt yet. Why don’t sons get these kinds of calls? My brother, Mark, got off easy, not that I was the type who would carry on about sibling rivalry until I was eighty-two.

*Inhale. Hold to the count of three. Exhale to the count of four.*

“I’d really like to hear what’s bothering you, ma,” I said. With the receiver tucked under my chin, I went to the bread cabinet.

I heard Dan come in the front door, then head to the closet to hang up his parka.

“Well, Sophie, this you won’t believe. Your father wants to throw away money every month on some poor outer world child.”

“Third world.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Dan came into the kitchen and mouthed a kiss, which always meant, “Don’t tell you mother I’m here. Then she’ll want to talk to me.”

“Your father says that since he’s getting older, he feels that it’s his responsibility to give some money back. I told him he never took it from these people in the first place.”

“There’s nothing wrong with dad giving to charity.”

“You think you know everything. You know what they do with the money? They buy these big radios they carry around on their shoulders. Don’t tell me I’m wrong, I’ve seen it.”

I found a puffy dinner roll that went down nicely with a glop of strawberry preserves on top. Heaven, thy name is carbohydrate.

I blew a kiss back to Dan. He went out the kitchen door to the back yard.

“Why don’t you try talking it out with dad?” I said. I’m such an idiot.

*Where art thou, oh chocolate?*

“You know I can’t talk to your father. Don’t you want to talk with him like I asked?”

“You didn’t ask.”

“But that’s what I meant.”

Ah. The peanut butter jar fell over when I reached for the pumpernickel. It was a sign, or karma, or something.

“Well, if you want my advice, I think you should just forget about it and let him go ahead. And stop making him feel guilty. I can’t come up with any other solution.” That wasn’t what she wanted. I’d never learn.

“You think of me as a typical Jewish mother, Sophie. It’s a very nasty term and I don’t like it.”

“Where did that come from? I never said you were.”

“That’s how you think of me. I’m just the stereotypic Jewish mother.”

Now I'm very sensitive about stereotypes of any sort, but really – my mother was a Yiddisha Archie Bunker. What a combination.

“Well, sometimes you say things that make me feel guilty.” I tore a slice of bread in half and alternately dunked it in the jelly, then the peanut butter.

“And you think only Jewish mothers do that? Doesn't Robin say things that make you feel guilty?”

“Of course, but . . .”

“Let me tell you this. It's not fair to make general statements about a whole group of people. Being Jewish and being a mother doesn't automatically make me a bad person.”

“I know that.”

“And one more thing,” she said. “When Robin says something that makes you feel guilty, guess which side of the family that's from? Dan's Gentile side of course. I know. I've heard her grandmother.”

I was glad Dan couldn't hear her.

“I'll call you later,” she said. “Your father wants his breakfast.”

“Bye, ma.”

I scraped the eggs into the garbage. It was just as well. Somewhere I read that burnt egg white is a carcinogen.

Dan was pacing around the empty February vegetable garden, not to say that it was so full of useful stuff in the summer either.

I waved for him to come in. We sat at the table. I wanted to tell him about the problem that was brewing.

“Have you noticed a dark blue pick-up truck hanging around?” I said.

“No.” He looked alarmed. “What’s going on?”

“Well, one of my patients is in an abusive relationship, and I think there’s a chance that her husband’s stalking me – just to scare me, probably.”

“Why would he do that?”

“You know about these situations, Dan. He’s probably afraid I’ll tell her to leave him.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I’m not even sure her husband is really hassling me. I’ve seen the truck a few times and I know that’s the kind he drives, but then today something really scary happened.” I told him about the roses and showed him the note.

He read it, and paused with an incredulous expression on his face. “Sophie, last week you said the brakes were mushy.”

“I know, Dan. That’s why I’m freaking out.”

**“Didn’t the Chevy people say it was just low on brake fluid?”**

**“Yes,” I said, frustrated. “That’s why I’m having a fit. Apparently it wasn’t simple like that at all.”**

**“What does this abusive guy do for a living?”**

**“He’s a car mechanic.”**

**“You have to call the police,” he said.**

**“I know.”**

**It was getting very late and I had to get dressed to get to the office on time.**

**I ran upstairs to dress. The bedroom phone rang.**

**“Hello?” I said.**

**“Doctor Green?”**

**“Yes.”**

**“It’s Carl.”**

**“Carl?”**

**“Elizabeth’s husband. You know, your patient Elizabeth Darby?”**  
**Talk about coincidental timing. Carl’s the guy I just told Dan about.**  
**How did this lunatic get my home number?**

“She asked me to tell you that she’s not going to see you anymore.”

“How did you get this number?” I said.

“Elizabeth gave it to me.” That had to be a lie. No patient had my home number.

I sat on the bed and took a breath, trying to figure out what the hell to do here. Carl’s abusive behavior toward his wife would likely escalate if he had a confrontation with me.

“Let me talk to Elizabeth, please, Carl.”

“Sorry. She’s not here.”

“Where’s ‘here’? Are you at home?”

“No.”

“Well, Carl, it’s not my policy to have anybody cancel appointments other than my patients themselves, unless they can’t call for themselves. So you’ll have to tell Elizabeth that I still expect to see her this week.”

“She won’t be there.”

“I’ll call your home and talk to her. Good-bye, Carl.”

“She’s not there.”

Now, I was getting very scared for Elizabeth. I had no choice but to be direct.

“Where is she?”

“Take it easy. She’s at her sister’s in Quincy.”

“Then you better give me the number.”

“Can’t do that. She doesn’t want to talk to you.”

“If you don’t give me a number where I can reach your wife, I’m going to call the police.”

“Wait a minute, for cryin’ out loud.” I could hear traffic in the background. “I’m just calling to cancel an appointment for her. You don’t have to call the damn cops.”

“That is exactly what I’m going to do if you don’t give me a number where I can reach her right now. Now what is it, or I’m hanging up.”

Amazingly enough, he gave me a number. Now I could bring up the note. “What did you mean about making the brakes fail, Carl?”

“What?”

Of course he’d respond as if he didn’t know what I was talking about.

“You know what I’m talking about,” I said.

“Lady, you’re nuts,” he said, laughing. “Just like all the shrinks.”

He hung up and I dialed Elizabeth’s number.

“Hello, this is Doctor Green calling. May I speak with Elizabeth Darby?”

“Hold on, please,” said an unfamiliar voice. I could hear whispering.

Elizabeth came on, sounding very tired.

“Doctor Green?”

“Elizabeth, are you hurt?”

“No, I’m fine.” I’d heard this lie from her many times.

“Why are you at your sister’s?” When someone’s in the throes of a violent relationship, I don’t waste any time with psychoanalysis.

“I’m um . . . here because I needed some time on my own. I’m fine though, really. Why are you calling? How did you find out I’m here?”

“Carl gave me your number. He just called me to say you’re discontinuing therapy.”

“Well, I . . . ” I heard her sigh.

“Elizabeth, please tell me what’s happening here.”

“We had a fight and I had to get away.” I could hear her lighting a cigarette. “I didn’t tell him to call you. I just told him that I was canceling this week’s appointment because I’d be here.” She paused. “I’m really sorry he bothered you. He probably misunderstood me and thought I wanted him to call because I’m out of town.”

One of a million rationalizations that didn’t add up.

“Elizabeth, is there something you want to tell me? If there’s something I should know, I want you to tell me.”

“Well, I . . . um.”

I gave her a chance to think, but it was nearly impossible to keep my anxiety out of the picture.

Finally she spoke. “Carl is making it very hard for me to come to therapy. He’s always trying to convince me you’re giving me the wrong advice. That’s what our fight was about.”

“Remember our discussion about you not letting yourself get caught up in Carl’s ideas?” The way people used the word ‘co-dependent’, like a lot of fleeting psychology terms, annoyed me. After all, who isn’t? But if there was ever a perfect clinical example, it was right here.

“Yes, but it’s hard to remember how I see things when he’s so convincing.”

“I know, Elizabeth. But I know you can. I’ve heard you stand up for yourself many, many times without folding.”

She took a drag from her cigarette. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“I have to ask you one more time. Are you hurt?”

An exhale. “No, I’m fine.” I’m not sure she knew what those words meant. They were just syllables she said time after time, by rote.

“Will you be in for next week’s appointment, then?”

“Yes, I will. I promise.”

We hung up and I rushed to get ready for the office. I ran down the stairs to find Dan, who was driving me to work because the other truck was in the shop. With any luck, I’d get there before my ten o’clock appointment.

We drove in our old blue Chevy Blazer. The brakes were working fine. A four-wheel drive truck was a blessing on Cape Cod when the snows kicked in and the plows didn’t. Today was one of the Cape’s rare winter days when there was sun.

“Did you unplug the coffee pot?” I asked, as we were driving along the winding two lane Old King’s Highway, also known as Route 6A. The coastline of Cape Cod Bay was visible between houses.

“Yes, Sophie,” he said.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

I could see expanses of marshland behind the homes. The tall golden grasses of the marsh led to pebbly stretches of sand in front of the ocean. As always, fishing trawlers were anchored in groups way out near the horizon.

After waiting at least twenty seconds, which I could barely manage, I asked, “Do you really remember doing it? I mean, can you picture yourself walking into the kitchen and putting your fingers on the plug and pulling it out of the socket? “

“Sophie,” he said, keeping his eyes on the road. “Let it go.”

I looked out the window at the old captains’ houses, sprawling white estates with additions attached over the course of the past two hundred years. There was nothing more beautiful than these old homes in February, when all the Christmas decorations were gone. They rested soberly, with empty wooden rocking chairs on bare front porches.

I pouted quietly.

“I want to talk about what’s going on,” he said.

“Me too.”

I pulled down the visor and used the mirror on the back to make sure I had nothing between my teeth. For a person of forty-one, I don’t look so bad. My features are nothing to drop dead over, just pretty. I don’t like my high forehead and my thin hair. Keeping it short and

layered makes it look thicker. Aside from a space between my two front teeth, my most distinctive feature is my perfect Elizabeth Taylor nose, for which I thank Liz and Doctor Adelman.

I smoothed out the wrinkles on my good gray pantsuit. Then I picked up the car phone to check in with the answering service.

“Just a delivery person this morning wanting directions to your house,” the operator who called herself Number Nine said.

“You mean you gave someone directions to my house?”

“No, I don’t know the way to your house. I just gave him your address.”

“Number Nine!” I shrieked at her. “You can’t give out my home address. Don’t you know what I do for a living?”

“I’m terribly sorry, Doctor Green. We get so many calls on Monday mornings and I wasn’t thinking. I just looked at the address we use in the computer for billing. I didn’t think about it being a problem.” I could see Dan shaking his head.

“Look, I have to know this will never happen again. I could be in big trouble because of this.”

“I’ll tell everyone about it. I really am sorry.” She sounded it too.

I pressed the “End Call” button to disconnect.

Dan and I have been married for fifteen years and nine months. We have different ways of looking at things. When the morning paper arrives, he checks the winning lottery number. I check the obituaries. If a travel brochure comes in the mail, he imagines splashing around in a warm sea. I imagine flight wreckage on the beach. Dan's the type of person who says things like, "If you have a problem, do something about it."

He also hums.

Although the name Daniel Green has a Jewish ring to it, he is not one of the Chosen. But that was okay with my folks. I was twenty-six years old already and way past my marriageable prime, in their opinion.

With his blond hair, blue eyes and Nordic appearance, he stands apart from my dark and full-featured forebears. His looks are as sharply contrasted to mine as are our personalities. He is tall and slim and has no weight problem. I'm somewhat short, and do I have a weight problem? Me?

Ha!

"Sophie," he said, breaking through my reverie. "I don't like what's going on."

"Of course not. Who would?"

I had to figure out what to do about Elizabeth. I was debating on discontinuing her therapy. I had to protect myself and my family.

My folks had a tough time with the non-Jewish issue at first, but now my mother thinks of Dan as the best thing since her mother's kreplach, and frankly, so do I, although very few things in life are as good as grandma's kreplach, especially since they used so much salt in those days.

"Sophie," he said, "I'm worried. And I don't think you're telling me everything."

"Worry and digestive disorders go hand in hand," I said.

"Goddamn it, this isn't a joke." He slammed his hands on the wheel.

"I know how you feel," I said. "Honestly I do. And I don't think of any of it as a joke." I touched his shoulder. "I'm going nuts too."

Normally I loved going to my office on the harbor. For thirteen years, I've been renting the same place in a magical old-but-remodeled tuna fish packing plant. The small gray shingled, weather-worn building has no foundation. It juts out into the harbor and stands on pilings, and therefore shifts and shakes in high winds and storms. Not many other people have offices there, probably because it's so ramshackle. There's just a real estate agent, a lawyer and a guy with a boat rental business who's only there in the summer.

Winter is my favorite time, all gray and white. But it underscores the isolated feeling when no summer tourists are around. Sea ice mounds on the pilings of the adjacent restaurant, closed and boarded up

for the season. All the boats moored in the summer are gone other than one lobster boat, called the Pilgrim. The captain is the only person I see between appointments when I look out the big bay window in my office. He always has his husky with him. The dog seems to have mastered his sea legs. No matter how rough the waves are when they're heading out to the sea, he keeps his position, like a figurehead, on the flat bow of the boat.

The harbor freezes over many times in January and February. It's called "ice up." The temperature, wind, and cloud cover have to interact in specific ways for the entire harbor to be covered with ice. Somehow, the old captain of the wooden Pilgrim seems to know just when to relocate his boat. Whenever he pulls it out of the marina and heads south, there's always a freeze the next day. With changing tides the ice cracks and shifts, making long drawn-out creaking sounds. Eventually the pieces break up and flow away and the lobster boat returns. The captain and I have never met, but he always looks up to see me in the window as his boat passes out to sea.

As Dan and I pulled into the parking lot, a panic attack festered in me. What if Carl came at me with a gun? What if he was there, at my office door now? I could feel the hot body rush that signals escalating anxiety. I kept my chin down to keep my head from shaking and got out of the car.

We went into the building. There was no one there and my anxiety let up.

We began to climb the stairs leading to my office. At the top of the stairs, the door to my waiting room was open. I froze.

Dan saw the open door and ran upstairs ahead of me. “Stay right there,” he said.

I could hear him talking to someone. With an approach-avoidance feeling, I went up the stairs and in the door.

Dan was talking to Gracie Brill, my first patient.

“Hello, Doctor Green,” Gracie said. “I’m sorry, I guess I’m early.”

“How did you get in?” I said.

She looked around, confused. “The door was open.”

“Okay, Gracie.” I tried to hide my concern. “I’ll be a few minutes. Why don’t you sit in the waiting room?”

Dan and I went into my office.

“You don’t really believe the door was just open, do you?” he said.

“I doubt it but it could have been. You know these locks are pieces of junk. We’ve come in before and found it open.”

I handed him my briefcase so I could take off my coat. He stood in front of me with his hands on my shoulders. “What if something happened to you?” he said. “I couldn’t go on if something happened to

you.” He looked down, but I saw the tears fill his eyes and it broke my heart. “You have to call the police.”

“I will, sweetheart. Right now.”

I looked at his worried face. Of course he was right. Carl was a time bomb.

I picked up the phone on the desk and asked information for the Barnstable Police non-emergency number. I dialed and it was busy.

“When I leave here, I’m going to buy a decent lock for this door,” he said.

“Good.” The line was still busy.

Making the decision to call the police actually brought me relief. The same way I feel when I finally make a mammogram appointment I’ve been putting off for months, even though the next step could be worse than the procrastination.

“Why don’t you call the emergency number?” he said.

“I can’t. They’d come right over and I don’t want the patient you just saw to be in the middle of this.”

As he reached in his back pocket for his key, I noticed that he was wearing the new ski sweater I had bought him. It had a band of little deer running around the middle. Then I noticed a mole on his left ear.

“How long have you had that?” I asked.

“Had what?”

“That mole on your ear.”

“I’ve always had it. Please don’t get that way you get.”

I went to the wooden file cabinet to get Gracie’s records. I used my key to unlock it.

“How come I’ve never noticed it before? How do you know you’ve always had it?”

“Sophie, please. How does anybody know they’ve always had something? It’s fine. Give it a break.” He sighed. “I think you get into these crazy things to change the subject and give yourself something stupid to worry about instead of a real problem.”

That couldn’t possibly be true.

He put my briefcase under the big blond oak desk and looked out the bay window at the sea.

I searched for the third time through the files. I couldn’t find Gracie’s.

“What’s the matter?” Dan knows me so well.

“My patient’s file is missing.”

In the file cabinet, Brendon, Buchanan, Cromwell. No Brill.

“Dan, you have to go now. I have about two seconds before my session starts.”

He kissed me on the forehead, and said, “I’ll be working at the center all day, so call me. Okay?”

“You know I will, and Dan . . . you’re wonderful, you know.” He left after one more forehead kiss.

Dan’s one of the lucky people in life who makes a living doing something he believes will make a difference in the world. He’s the director of a youth center in Hyannis. It’s in a building that was once used as a Salvation Army shelter. He has two social workers working under him and several volunteers. There are about forty kids who go there after school. Most of them have to go as a requirement from their therapist. They never want to be there at first. Dan is good at getting them to do things that are fun, but in reality are therapeutic. One room is set up like a TV game show and the kids work together as teams to win. Dan has a Ph.D. in psychology but only a few people know that. He doesn’t care about being called Doctor.

I called the service again. I keep the ringer off so I’m not disturbed during sessions. Therefore I don’t know when calls come in. The operator said that there were three hang-ups within the last ten minutes.

I bet Carl knew I was coming in at this hour and expected me to answer the phone. This was probably connected to Gracie’s missing file. But why on God’s earth would he want her file? Probably other files were gone, too. I decided to check. Elizabeth Darby’s file was also missing.

I tugged at the bottom drawer of the file cabinet. When I got it opened, I reached down for a file. Something squirmy wrapped itself around my finger and I felt a sharp bite.

I jerked my hand back, flinging whatever it was across the room and behind my desk chair. My heart thumped. I was afraid to take a look but I had to know what it was. I walked over and peered behind the chair. It was a sea worm, about six inches long and slimy. It was covered with hundreds of legs from one end to the other. I knew sea worms were used as bait. If you picked one up, it would spin around, wrap itself around your finger and bite.

My heart still pounding, I went back to the file drawer and looked inside. I couldn't really see anything, so I got a ruler out of my desk drawer and gingerly pushed aside a couple of files with it. The bottom of the drawer was covered with a whole mass of the disgusting things, moving. Dozens of sea worms. "Shit!" I jumped back.

Oh, God, please.

I leaned over the chair and got the one on the floor to curl itself around the ruler. I dumped it in the file drawer and slammed it shut.

I closed my eyes and insisted to my brain that it focus on my work. I couldn't wait any longer to see Gracie. I gave myself a talk. I can be a professional in spite of wanting to run out of the building screaming. I knew a surgeon who operated the afternoon his son died. He had to. He was the only one who could do it. And right now, my patient came first.

Gracie Brill, who's thirty-two years old, began therapy two months ago essentially because she wanted to overcome her fear of flying. But only rarely was someone's presenting complaint the real reason that therapy was entered. Usually they needed a symptom as an entry ticket, then we could find out what the real problem was.

Gracie operated a daycare service in her home. She lived alone in a small year-round rental in Yarmouth. Many of her relatives had moved off-Cape and she wanted to be able to fly to visit them. Last week, Gracie reported that she finished her sessions at Cape Cod Airlines New Beginners Flying Club. She should only know that she's seeing a psychiatrist who thinks that the idea of traveling through the sky in a multi-ton machine that has a million vital parts made in somebody's garage by God-knows-who, is an idea that should have gone out with the whalebone corset.

Gracie was single and adept at dating men who were no good for her. Usually she picked the no-commitment distancers or the married ones.

She was lovely, about five and a half feet tall with premature all gray hair that she wore shoulder length and played with frequently. The gray color was most unusual, but quite flattering. She came to today's session wearing jeans and a big white fisherman's sweater.

"How are you, Doctor Green? Is everything okay?" she asked, as she sat in the brown and white wingback. The other large chair, which I took, was made of brown leather. Each seat was placed on either side of

the bay window and they faced slightly away from the view, which could often be too distracting. The angle was such, however, that you could stare out the window at the harbor if you wanted to, which was especially helpful during quiet times.

“Yes, I’m fine,” I said.

Gracie was silent for a while. I tried to relax by looking around my office. There was a small blond wooden table in front of the window between the two chairs, which was essentially just for a box of tissues. Other than my desk and a director’s chair that I sat in for marriage counseling, there was no other furniture.

In one corner was a hanging brass pendulum that Dan had made for me - kind of a Zen thing, he said. It hangs from the ceiling and nearly touches the floor, where there is a circle of fine white sand three feet in diameter. The pendulum has a pointed end, and with just a feather touch it moves. It begins going back and forth, but slowly changes to oblong circles. Each circle overrides the previous one just a little bit, which makes for beautiful unique designs. I’ve yet to find a patient who wasn’t fascinated and calmed by it. The sea calmed most people too, but you couldn’t count on that. Someday it was so rough and swirling that there’d be whitecaps in the harbor.

The tiny office has a wonderfully shabby quality to it, and in a real sense the flavor of a fish packing plant remained. When we’d have a three-day rain storm, I could smell the faint odor of fish. I didn’t decorate the walls with diplomas or pictures. Other than a ship’s clock

above the desk, I kept the walls plain, which was just as well, because when it did rain, drips would snake their way down from the ceiling.

Gracie curled some of her hair around her first finger. Whenever she spoke about her boyfriend she never looked me in the eyes. Finally she turned her head toward the bay window and said, “I wanted to talk some about, you know . . . Eliot . . . if it’s okay.”

“This is your hour, Gracie.”

Still twirling her hair, she said, “I know, I know. I just get nervous sometimes.” Silence again.

Gracie’s boyfriend, so to speak, is Eliot Wohlman. That is, Doctor Eliot Wohlman. He is the chief psychiatrist at the inpatient facility for chronic sexual offenders in Yarmouth. He’s also a staff doctor at Hyannis Hospital. He sat next to me at last month’s medical staff party. His wife sat next to him.

Eliot had an affair with another patient of mine over five years ago. Her name was Jeanne. She never recovered from the relationship. One night, she took all her mother’s Dalmane and never woke up.

Gracie said she had told Eliot she was seeing me and I’m sure that made him uptight. If I ever broke the confidentiality barrier, he’d be out of a job, and probably out of a marriage.

I had pieces of his background in my files because of Jeanne and now Gracie. He was forty-four years old and had one teenage daughter,

although as I understood it, not having a son was a vital misfortune for him. His father was a neurologist who didn't think that psychiatry was a respectable medical profession. Eliot received many honors for his work not only with sexual offenders, but with criminals in general, and is considered, at least locally, an expert in his field. I see his name in the paper frequently when there's a story involving psychology and criminal behavior.

I couldn't tell Gracie what I knew about Eliot, of course. She knew that I often ran into him at the hospital, but so far, she didn't push me about what I might know about him. I tried to shelve my thoughts and focus on her immediate concerns.

"I am making progress, Doctor Green." Her finger found her hair again. It might have been my imagination, but I thought I heard my waiting room door open and close. "I won't stand for his sneaking around with me anymore." She looked at me directly. "If he wants to see me, then he'll have to take me places, like normal people do. And I told him just that!"

She believed that progress had been made because she had stood up for herself and asked to be treated in a manner more to her liking. It was hard to keep my opinions to myself, and frequently I didn't, but it was too early in her therapy to be confrontational.

"Good for you, Gracie, for asking for what you deserve," I said. "I hope that you're tremendously proud of yourself."

She blushed and said, "Well, I am."

Gracie's involvement with unattainable men has made for years of unhappiness. She has been unable to have a relationship with unencumbered intimacy, assuming there is such a thing, because she's too afraid of the potential for loss. With the men she chooses, she feels protected from ever facing that possibility. The down side of this is that it doesn't work. Not only does she have an empty space inside and outside, but her attachment to Eliot is just as strong as if he were single. The fact that he is married is only a veil - it doesn't protect her from anything.

"Doctor Green, I also think that it's time that I make a decision about him." She looked at me for an approving nod and got one. "I'm going to talk to him and um . . ."

I didn't want to push her at such an important junction. It had to come from her.

"I, um . . . I . . ." She put her head down and covered her face with her hands. It was hard for me not to step in. "I'm going to ask him. I mean I'm going to tell him that it's either me or his wife." She sat up and looked at me with tear-filled eyes. "I just can't keep going on like this. I'm miserable. I'm so tired of sleeping alone every night and thinking about him and his wife." She took a tissue and wiped her eyes.

"You sound very lonely."

"Oh, I am. I'm lonely, and I'm also disgusted with myself. What kind of a jerk spends her life dating married men?"

“Gracie, you are most certainly not a jerk. You are a very brave young woman who is about to take a courageous step.” Although I’ve heard many patients make the declaration that Gracie made, most do not follow through. But I had hope for Gracie. Like the flying problem, when she made up her mind to do something, she did it.

After talking some more about her courage and commitment, her hour came to a close.

The ship’s clock chimed six times, indicating it was eleven o’clock. Gracie, knowing her session was over, stood up. At the door she turned and said, “Good-bye, Doctor Green. It’s always so long between appointments.”

When I first heard of Doctor Wohlman from my patient Jeanne, the pop psychology topic of the day was women in go-nowhere relationships. Jeanne was crazy about him. I thought at first that therapy wouldn’t be too tough, and we would focus on her fears of intimacy and other reasons that she might be attached to a non-committing man. But as time went on, the pathological aspects of her personality and subsequently the inappropriate behavior of Doctor Wohlman took star billing.

They would arrange to meet at out of the way hotels off-Cape, where no one would know him. Jeanne’s mother knew nothing of the affair and believed her daughter’s phony stories about where she was spending the night. The relationship became an obsession for both of

them and Jeanne clung to the belief that Eliot would leave his marriage and be devoted to her someday.

Unfortunately, from social events at the hospital, I also knew his wife. On Cape Cod, as in other small communities, everybody knew everybody, and anonymity was basically impossible. I felt sorry for Nancy, Eliot's wife. She seemed quiet and refined. I avoided her whenever I could. After all, I knew two women involved with her husband.

Gracie possessed the same naive qualities as Jeanne, but Jeanne had a long history of severe depression, which Gracie did not.

Jeanne's suicide still haunts me. A lot. I couldn't shake the guilt. When I was ten years old, my younger brother Jeremy was horsing around near my bedroom window. He accidentally fell out and died. I didn't think he was going to fall. Nobody blamed me. As a matter of fact, my parents went out of their way to try to make me feel that I wasn't responsible. They even sent me to a psychiatrist, which I hated. I suppose my brother's death is correlated with my persistently expecting the worst. And I suppose it has to do with a lot of things, my choice of careers, for example. Sometimes I wonder if every time I help a patient, I subconsciously think I'm paying my dues for what happened.

After Gracie left, I had a little time to look around the building. I was nervous about the door that I had heard open in my waiting room during her session. I decided to deal with the sea worms first. I put on my gloves and gingerly got all of the files out of the drawer. I tried not to

look at the squirming mass of worms. I wrestled the whole drawer out and went down the stairs and outside to the dumpster.

In the parking lot, I saw Gracie picking up what appeared to be my files strewn all over the place.

“Gracie,” I called and ran to the dumpster. I upended the drawer inside it.

She handed me the stack of files. Hers was on top. She was pale and flustered.

“How did they get out here?” she said.

“I don’t know.” I couldn’t hide how upset I was.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I didn’t read them or anything.” Gracie had never been the type to lie. “But what if somebody read mine?”

I assured her no names were mentioned in her file.

“You’re positive? If anybody knew it was Eliot . . .”

She was protecting him, not herself.

“Yes, I’m sure, Gracie. Try not to worry about this and concentrate more on what we talked about in session. This problem is mine, not yours.”

She said good-bye and raced to her car. The packed sand parking lot was surrounded by big blue spruce trees that could have hidden

about seven hundred people. Behind the trees were tall sand dunes. Normally that would paint a beautiful picture. But not today. I would rather have seen a Dunkin' Donuts than a sand dune. At least then I'd know there were people around. I leafed through the records. All of them belonged to current patients.

I went back in the building and up to my office. I put the drawer and the files back in the cabinet. The non-emergency line to the police was still busy. I decided to call the emergency line after my last session so no patient would be here to get pulled into the middle of everything.

My afternoon people all had substance abuse problems. One lady drank heavily to quell depression. Another combined alcohol and marijuana to make her anxiety subside, and the third was a binge eater who used massive intakes of food to stuff down her feelings of rage and despair. But then, she'd feel even more despair and the only thing that would bring relief was vomiting. In all three cases, the use of the addictive substance made the depression worse.

I started to think about the peanut butter and Ritz crackers in my bottom drawer and with clinical finesse, associated my desire for that magnificent combo with an attempt to take my mind off my fear.

God made it that not only was there Ritz and peanut butter in the bottom drawer, but there was also a phone book. A divine opportunity. I decided it would be smart to find a more specialized office at the police department rather than call the emergency line. I found the Special

Services Bureau of the Barnstable Police Department. After a Ritz with a shmear, I picked up the phone.

I gave my name and said, "I'd like to talk to someone about a problem I'm having at my office."

"What sort of problem?"

I don't know why I let this get to me, but I didn't want to have to answer a million questions before being hooked up to the right person. This was hard enough already. Ritz and a dab.

"Please let me talk to a detective. This is a sensitive situation since it involves one of my patients."

A gruff sounding person took over.

"Detective Samms."

I repeated what I had just told the first person.

"Doctor Green, let's meet at your office."

This was so sudden. "You mean right away?"

He laughed. "How about tomorrow at noon?"

I gave him directions and hung up, feeling scared of what would happen after tomorrow's meeting. This was all so new to me. I took a deep breath and looked out at the sea. The sparkles on the surface of the water were hypnotic. But by the time Dan was due to pick me up, the

daylight had gone and the sea was black with long fingers of light darting on the surface from streetlamps on the other side of the harbor.

I gathered my briefcase and my purse and scooted downstairs to meet Dan in the parking lot. I was excited. I knew he'd be so pleased to hear about tomorrow. I always waited to see the headlights of the Blazer before leaving the building, but calling the police made me feel irrationally safe. So I stepped outside. But Dan wasn't there.

I scurried back up the stairs and checked with my answering service in case he had called to say he would be late. No calls. I tried him at the center and at the house. Then I tried the car phone, which often didn't connect. No luck.

I hate it when this happens. I'm the only one in the building after five o'clock and the harbor is winter-empty. This would be a perfect opportunity for Carl to arrive.

My saner side said that Dan thought I was through at six-thirty rather than five-thirty, since that was frequently the time when I finished. My normal side said that Dan had either been in a car crash, suffered a heart attack, had a ruptured appendix, was beaten up at the center, was rushing Robin to the hospital with internal bleeding, or was lying in the woods in a coma, never to be found again.

Anybody could come up the stairs now, and there wouldn't a single thing I could do about it. The other offices were empty. I was trapped. Trapped in a little room by myself, on a secluded harbor in the winter, without even one damn boater out there.

I locked the door to my waiting room and then went into my main office and locked that door too. If someone tried to break in through the waiting room door, I'd have a few minutes to call the police before they broke into the office.

Who was I kidding? I'd never have enough time. I knew it.

I turned off all the lights so no one would know I was here, and sat looking out the bay window to the street on the other side of the harbor, trying to make out a car the size of the Blazer coming down the road.

As the minutes passed and the night grew darker and quieter, my worry level soared. What would I ever do without Dan? It was an unbearable thought, but one that I often obsessed about at three in the morning.

By this time, I had worked myself into a frenzy, something I was able to do with great ease lately.

Someone rattled the outside door to my waiting room.

Let it be Dan. Please . . . God. That way I can rip his throat out for being late.

How could I find out who it was without letting anyone to know I was in here? Too afraid to open my main office door, I didn't move. The door rattled again. Dan would never do this without calling my name. I knew it was Carl.

More rattling and then a boom, and the noise stopped. Someone was standing in my waiting room, on the other side of my door. I crawled over to the desk and felt for the phone. And then the rattling began on my office door.

I dropped my purse and briefcase, which made a loud noise, and picked up the phone. The rattling stopped.

I heard footsteps go away from me toward the outside door. In one crazy second, I knew that if I didn't open that door right now, I might never know who it was.

I didn't stop to think of being hurt. My instinct was to act.

I flung open the door. Eliot Wohlman was standing in my dark waiting room. I flicked on the light.

“What the hell are you doing here, Eliot?”

He put both of his hands up and said, “Don't shoot.”

“That's not funny. What are you doing here?”

“May I at least sit down, Sophie?” Without waiting for my reply, he sat on the couch in the waiting room.

I pleaded silently, “Where on earth is Dan?”

And then I smelled something burning.

I ran to the waiting room door and opened it.

“Don’t you smell something burning, Eliot?” I thought it was strange that he stayed on the couch while I ran to the door.

“No, Sophie. I think you’ve been working too hard. Come sit on the couch with me and take it easy.” I continued to stand.

“The reason I’m here,” he said, “is because a patient of yours who is an acquaintance of mine told me that someone had gone through your files.”

“So that’s why you broke down the door?”

“I didn’t break down the door. I just gave it a push because it was loose and felt opened.”

He sat with his coat on, and his legs extending out in front of him. He looked like a young handsome Eliot Gould, but bigger and taller, which gave him an Eliot-Gould-as-a-lumberjack-in-a-Ralph-Lauren-overcoat quality. Anyone would have thought that this was a perfectly normal scene, with two colleagues chatting at the end of their day.

“What do you want?” I said.

“Sophie. I live a block away. I thought you were here. I just stopped in to see if you had a problem I could help with, and when I opened the door and saw nobody was here, I started to leave.”

“But you tried my office door . . . ”

“Of course, I tried your office door.” That faint odor of smoke again. Maybe it was just someone’s wood fire in the distance.

“Why didn’t you just knock?” I asked.

“Because by then I didn’t think you were here, but I heard a noise in your office and it looked dark in there, and I thought I’d better check it out. Come on, Sophie. You and I go back a long way. What are you accusing me of anyway?”

I didn’t answer.

“What happened to the files?” he said. “Did you find out who took them?”

“I have a detective working on it,” I said.

No one was mentioning, of course, the absurdity of me having this conversation with a man who is not only married, but seeing one of my patients, and partly responsible for the suicide of another. Maybe it wasn’t Carl who looked through my files. Maybe Eliot wanted to see if he was mentioned in Gracie’s records.

“Eliot, I’m fine. You don’t need to stay.” I looked for telltale signs of anxiety. No redness on his neck. His eyes were steady and focused on mine. His facial muscles were relaxed.

“I just thought you could use my help, Sophie. I’m more familiar with career criminals than you are and I thought . . . ”

“Who said it was a career criminal? We’re just talking about someone taking files, aren’t we?”

That burning smell again.

He started to leave, now clearly uncomfortable and suddenly in a hurry.

I got to the waiting room doorway before him.

“You sure you don’t smell anything?” I asked as he walked around me and began going down the stairs.

He stopped and turned around. “I don’t. And I think if you were able to be a little bit objective right now, you’d diagnose yourself as someone who needs to take a break. You’re showing all the signs of excessive stress.”

“Thanks for your concern.”

“I know you don’t mean that, and you will probably have a negative reaction to any offer from me to work with your detective. But it is my area of expertise.”

He left and slammed the outside door. I ran down the stairs. The smell was getting stronger. Was it an olfactory hallucination? I didn’t see anything. I went up and down the first floor hallway, touching office doors, feeling no heat.

Then I noticed a small trail of white smoke coming from under the slatted door of the utility closet.

In a state of panic, I watched as a huge plume of smoke billowed out from the closet, blocking my view of the outside door.

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