

38

I sometimes wonder how other psychologists would react to you; would they put an end to your tactics at once? Would they find another way to interpret your infinite longing for, and repetitive biting of, the nourishing breast? Over and over again, yearning and ambivalent, in a manner that keeps this love-hate relationship so troubling... Would they be able to explain it in a manner that would reach you and truly change something, shape new connections in your brain, pump new blood into your heart, awake you?

I know you're scared to death of being readmitted, but I don't believe more of the same talk is doing any good. And however difficult it is to let yourself contemplate the things that came up in our conversation, and actually feel the feelings that Sarah and Jeff's parental care provoked in you, I hope you will.

I think all the time of how we eventually met, how readily you let me lead you to the entrance of the grand building, where I nodded encouragingly to the doorman, hoping he wouldn't delay us, wouldn't stand in our way of a safe haven. How you let Sarah and Jeff peel off the signs of your escape, the hiding out, the hunger, the exhaustion. Itamar, how did you go like that to an internet café to write to me? And what places sent you away, only for you to misdirect your anger and send it my way? And all that time, while Sarah and Jeff gave you a "makeover," while keeping me busy with errands so I could come back somewhat reconciled, all that time I thought about my grandparents taking into their tiny Tel Aviv apartment their relatives from "over there", human

brands plucked from Europe's fire. Washing them and feeding them with measured portions, absorbing their night terrors into their own bodies and souls, and their little kid, my mother, was there too.

When we finally sat in Jeff's study, I couldn't tell if you were more familiar than foreign, so I listened quietly until within the warmth of this wood-paneled room, I felt the chill of your Brooklyn basement. Itamar, you can trust Sarah and Jeff, I know this from my own experience, and when I'm back in Israel they will continue to help. While I was sent on needless errands, did they tell you anything about themselves? about us? Both are very dear to me. They were inseparable childhood friends, "forever and ever and always" is actually their saying, and they kept their friendship throughout life's upheavals, through careers and marriages, through bereavement and widowhood. Jeff was a professor of literature, Sarah was a psychiatrist at a university hospital, both are wonderful teachers, to me as well. They are long retired, and in the beautiful study where we sat, Jeff writes, and Sarah occasionally gives consultations. It was through Sarah's connections that we were able to get information on what happened to you.

I'm adding a few words now that I know for sure I can stay a little longer and take my return flight from New York. I'll be at the hospital tomorrow morning to see you. Sarah thinks I shouldn't stay, and God only knows why this feels a little as if you won.

39

No, you won.

In so many ways.

Back in therapy, and now too. The continuation of our relationship, after all, is predicated on my defeat. You therapists give it all kinds of sweet euphemisms, defining false consciousness and resistance and transference as if these were different types of winds blowing into your ear and settling in your soul, but the simple truth is that you demand defeat. One side must be vanquished, beaten, crushed to dust. I'm not surprised that this is the preferred *modus operandi* of therapists, because what is your office, Ella, if not a sparring ground in which there is room for only one Lady and one Peddler?* Until he is overpowered, this peddler; until he is tired of begging, falls to his knees and surrenders himself to her in obedience.

You think I'm in the institution again, just another one of your obedient patients. But that's not me. Maybe for you, and only you, I could have kept up this charade. I could show up at the institution tomorrow and make up another story, just to be admitted as an ordinary patient, sedated and fogged up. But I've grown weary. The phone calls Sarah made yielded the information I was after. It's more proof of the efforts I've invested, those that have already become a part of me. And then you, of all people, suddenly surprised me. You crossed a line. These are exactly the

* S.Y. Agnon, "The Lady and the Peddler", in *A Book that was Lost: Thirty-Five Stories*, The Toby Press, 2008.

kinds of moments I'd relish in therapy. All of a sudden, in a show of madness, you change your plans, arrive, and do exactly the opposite of what's expected of you. Now you're with me, truly with me. Suddenly there are no sides, no winners or losers, only the two of us against the world. I'm tired. You truly did win. In some roundabout way, you won. You can pat yourself on the back. Maybe not so much a knockout but in points. You defeated me, you beautiful, crazy lady.

Indeed, I looked like a homeless person. And if you think that someone can look homeless without actually being so, you're wrong. This mistake is the only justification for your behavior. I really was all those things. I really did sleep in a basement. I really did wear rags. I really did eat leftovers from the crates behind the Co-op. The only little or big difference, that gulf standing between me and a real homeless person, is that measure of hope, the possibility of slipping out of this costume at any given moment.

It turns out that it isn't that easy. So while you thought you were dressing a homeless, bathing a lost soul, in my mind's eye I was still the same. But you set signposts leading the way back to civilization, you really did do all those things, all *that* was real.

And I really did attack Jess. I left marks on her. I beat her. She told her friends on the swimming team that she had fallen. Or at least that's what she told me. Just like a battered wife. And yes, I know that's not so far off. And yes, she also pressed charges and now I'm awaiting trial. But she didn't have me committed. That's just my story. The more basic, simple truth also has to be said – I didn't stir up this drama for fun. Drama is the only thing that would have brought you to me because you need it, you feed off it; without it you're too much in control, too cerebral and calculated for me to steer you in my direction.

I'm the treacherous one. It's true. I'm not where you thought I was, and I'm not swallowing the meds prescribed by your friends.

But don't think for a moment that this detracts from your own treacherousness. From your seduction. None of my ploys can chip away at what you are. I'd venture to say that treachery and seduction are every therapist's lot. Maybe it's your secret handshake. Those who know how to cheat and lie with therapeutic affectation may enter your gates, the slogan proudly displayed at every conference - "Welcome, treacherous and seductive therapists!" And you take such pride in it because it highlights how "self-aware" and "sensitive" you are.

I have no idea how you'll react to what I did to you. I realize this isn't some party prank, a playful ruse in which you're informed of a delegation from England arriving to review your expertise, and you appear at the appointed time, prepared, having brushed up on the English terminology, open the door and I'm the one standing there, flower in hand, and you say: but there's a delegation coming, and I say: I'm the delegation. This isn't the case. I understand the difference. I'm not sorry. I came to understand long ago that the distinction between reality and fantasy is arbitrary. What we have is real.

Where will you go from here? Now you know everything. I'm still in New York.

Yours,

Itamar

40

Itamari,

Distinguishing reality from fantasy isn't always that easy. I get what you're doing and understand your need for it, but I also want to tell you: enough, let it go, it's me writing to you, not Feinberg. You're asking where I'll go from here? I'll keep visiting you at the hospital until my familial obligations force me to return to Israel. Maybe by then that healthy kernel inside you will grow, and we'll be able to think together of the next step. In the meantime, Sarah has asked the head of your ward to allow us to continue our correspondence, for the sake of treatment continuity, I suppose, or something similar.

We'll talk soon,

Ella

41

I deserve it.

And no one punishes like you. Who taught you? Your mother? Father? Yours are sophisticated punishments; the thought of being your spouse is downright terrifying.

Look what happened with the pages I sent you, maybe the most important pages ever to land at your doorstep. You haven't said a word about them, as if they too were mere fantasy. And suddenly I'm thinking – I did send them to you, didn't I? I placed them in a stamped envelope and sent it, I'm almost sure of it. Yes, one of the most important rules you therapists have is to never validate the patient's feelings. At first it really does provide the soul with some solace because the patient has to listen to himself. But this self-listening also melts one's resistance. Because our sense of normalcy stems from those same words our loved ones whisper in our ear, that assuaging incantation that means you're human, and what you're feeling was felt by other human beings before you. But the patient keeps talking to himself without getting any feedback, the threads of his thought entangling, and then he believes he's even more disturbed than he thought and that maybe he needs even more time to listen to himself, and all you do in response is nod, say yes, and how does that make you feel, and by doing so you push him even further away from the feeling of normalcy, of being human. All he wanted was to be told that his voice doesn't sound like a snore or a bray, that it is clear, coherent, and even if it's a loud cry, it is still of the human variety.

And once again you throw the ball back in my court. Should I wait for you in the ward? Stand at the entrance and try to convince you that this was all an elaborate scam I concocted? Would you believe me?

It turns out I have to go and complicate everything. To aspire to be with the most complicated woman in the most complicated relationship. And for what? I could have found that same erotic tension with someone who hates gays or thinks every Arab wants to kill us. With that kind of woman, I'm also guaranteed good sex. The difference of opinion would be balanced by the physical connection, and the desire to change a mind would turn into aggression between the sheets. Well, at least until penetration. You remember how much we used to talk about my anxiety surrounding the act of penetration? Hours on end in your office. And what's happened since? I'm fully functioning, that much is true, but the anxiety hasn't abated. It's there, growling like a caged beast, a bear waking up from its hibernation to find that its cave has been boarded up. I choose emotional tension instead, which can also generate good, wild sex, but never entirely drains from the body, it always leads a life of its own, tearing you up inside.

What does it take to be in a relationship with you? What would it take to convince you of someone's love? What would he have to sacrifice? Reading this, you probably notice that I'm completely sane. Stable, maybe not entirely, but stable enough. Here I go digging myself a grave again. Ella. Ella. Ella. How long until your kids can't do without you, until you start losing your balance and go back to them? Tell me, so I can prepare myself for yet another goodbye. I'll be at the entrance tomorrow. You can judge for yourself.

Itamar

42

I don't want to write about the things you do and say when I visit you. Inside the ward, outside the ward, inside your head, inside mine. I want to write about something else, about the frontiers of our relationship, about the outlying areas – the very areas in which someone must cease to exist for the other to thrive. Of course, we can address the belief that in order to truly meet me, you must lose your mind. In my honor and for my sake. But let me describe things from another angle, from your constant demand that I will cease to exist as your psychologist, almost as if the psychologist must die and a woman be born. With us, nothing seems to stay multifaceted, with its lasting complexities and swaying shades. This notion of a life for a life brings out of us nothing but the hardest materials, close to the tips of our nerves. It isn't coincidental. It speaks to our most basic human experience.

When teaching my students, I call it “terms of endearment” – the unique terms characterizing the foundations of the psyche. At times, violations of these terms happen; what was very much needed wasn't doled out regularly, not enough or too much, or just at the wrong time. We learn to live with these breaches, the psyche hardens and ossifies around them, like a petrified tree trunk uprooted by the wind, like a shell around the intruding grain of sand, like a broken bone.

You see, we all learn to live with the absence, with the excess, with the injury, but there are moments when something is too painful, too evocative, and the scar splits open, our faces contort

with defeat, the old rage resurfaces. In our case, I think our terms of endearment somehow perfectly complement each other. The materials we wish to feed off, to spew, to spit out, to ingest, to hand over – they complement and feed each other. And the more you want to be, to live, the more I must be demolished. And it probably also works the other way around.

When I arrived in New York, motherless and enveloped in mourning, Sarah held her arms open and said to me: Now's the time to be patient and mindful, because everything's exposed underneath that brittle skin of yours. For therapists, she said in her responsible tone, this might be a challenging time, prone to judgment errors. Because patients feel the injury, some will dive in, each will attempt to make his own sense of it.

During that same conversation she gave me a book by a psychiatrist friend of hers, Glen Gabbard. When she retired for her nap I went to the park, sat on my favorite bench next to the zoo and read it, and I knew it was Sarah's caveat. No one knows my terms of endearment as deeply and thoroughly as Sarah.

Gabbard's book was about therapists who have abandoned the ground rules: giving their patients free sessions and money, inviting them into their homes for dinners and social gatherings, becoming their friends, sleeping with them. Gabbard wrote that these therapists were, for the most part, keen professionals (yes, you can smirk if you want, but I'm trying to understand the difficult cases, in which people cannot be considered systematic abusers of human ethics). Gabbard suggests that these therapists have stumbled upon a mutual trap, a two-sided destructive invitation. For instance, a desperate suicidal patient meets a psychologist who has just experienced a devastating loss. One is already willing to give up, the other is longing for reparation, I guess both of them are. In these situations, pain cannot stay as it is. Painful. Something has to be done. Maybe the psychologist feels he has to

prove that he's not the abandoning parent who long ago betrayed the patient in the childhood drama. He's different, he will spare no effort, he'll do anything it takes. Anything? He then corresponds with the patient's almost hopeless demand for a proof of a life worth living, with someone who will go to the ends of the earth to save her. And it becomes impossible to breathe, right? As the analytical space collides into their realities.

I apologize if this sounds like a lecture in psychoanalytic psychotherapy. For me, these words resonate in a truly deep and healing manner. If you want to know me, as you say, that's where it lies. I'm a motherless daughter, a motherless mother, and all my vulnerabilities resurface with you. Many times I feel as if I have to defeat the turmoil between us, the concessions and cessation between you and your mother, the envy and hatred between me and my mother. And in the background, like an almost muted note, I hear my voice telling me: In thy blood, Live. I don't even know what that expression means, or why we say it on Passover. I know it has something to do with the earth being commanded, perhaps even sentenced, to welter in its own blood, in its pain. You probably know what it means, but I have no intention of delving into biblical exegesis. And yet, even without knowing where this expression comes from, it suits me, suits us. Because you're asking me to live in your blood, but I shall live in mine. You must understand there are things in your inner world, as well as your outer world, that I cannot change. And I'm sorry, Itamar, but I want to heal, I want to shed the veil of mourning, and soon I'll want to leave this place. Our time is running out. Will you wake up from your hibernation, Itamar?