



HONEYCOMB HEART

Much as I tried, I struggled to warm to her. She was in her late twenties, petite, pretty and well-groomed. I have an unfortunate predisposition against overly feminine women. I can't help thinking that they are false. Moreover, it probably did not help that she was a teacher. My husband's thirteen-year-old daughter, Fern, had refused to attend school that morning, claiming to have a migraine. My uncharitable mood, hopefully disguised behind a friendly countenance, represented an example of what is known in the trade as countertransference, the feelings of the therapist towards the client, which is an unavoidable part of the job.

This was our first session after a fifteen-minute phone conversation. I had talked about how psychotherapy worked and we had discussed whether we could work together. As usual, I had pledged to be respectful, empathetic and non-judgemental (hm-hmmph!). Bailie had stipulated that Friday afternoons were convenient for her because she had Friday afternoons off from her job. This was the fourth out of five sessions I had scheduled for the day. I specialise in cognitive behavioural therapy for depression and anxiety and use a range of therapeutic approaches.

Bailie sat before me wearing a dramatic, little-girl-lost look. Her lover, Colin, was another teacher at the school where she taught art. I thought of one of my neighbours, Colin, who also happened to be a teacher. Bailie and this particular Colin had got together at a time of mutual stress – an OFSTED inspection. Six months previously, a group of teachers had gone for a drink after work to let off steam. Bailie and Colin had stayed later than the others. Colin, she said, had been hilarious. She had loved it when he had poked fun at their colleagues with his funny impressions. They had kissed at the end of the evening. Things had



escalated over the following few weeks. It had not taken long before Colin had talked about leaving his wife and living with Bailie. She was undeniably excited – it was, she thought, what she wanted – but the prospect nonetheless scared her.

It sounded like a query one might see in an advice column rather than voiced in a consulting room. One question I had right away was why Bailie had come to me in the first place.

‘Do you want advice or self-understanding?’

‘I don’t know. Both, I think.’

She talked about how she had split up from her husband the previous year after he had cheated on her.

‘We have a little boy, Cairo, who’s five.’

The split with Liam had apparently been hell. She did not want to put another woman through what she had gone through, let alone the pain Colin’s two children would endure if he deserted his family.

At this stage in my career, I was in my late thirties and had been a psychotherapist for twelve years. I was going through a tough time. A couple of months earlier, I had been badly affected by one my clients, Violet, suddenly discontinuing her treatment. Violet’s departure had unsettled me and shaken my faith in my ability. I had had some successes during my career, going on feedback from my clients, but was this totally deserved? A client tells me about a problem. We discuss it. However, naturally we don’t stop there. I encourage them to be as open as possible about every aspect of their life. Sometimes, I can help them. Sometimes, evidently, I can’t.



‘Colin has an answer for everything. I feel so flattered by him. He treats me like a princess.’

She flicked at her dark wavy hair, perhaps visualising herself in a regal light. Was this how teachers looked nowadays? Her high-heeled shoes to my mind were wholly inappropriate.

‘He says he will help me to look after Cairo. He says marital affairs happen all the time. He seems blasé about it.’

‘But you have ambivalent feelings?’

‘I like his gung-ho approach – I find it very manly – but I don’t know if he has really considered the implications of everything. It would be a massive scandal in the school. One or both of us would almost certainly lose our jobs.’

It had been a long week. I had seen a lot of people with various issues, some of which were more serious than others, all of which were important in their own way. At the severer end of things, Janet had terminal cancer. At her session, we had composed the eulogy for her funeral (to save her husband the trouble of doing it himself). Another client, Howard, who had recently been made redundant, had anger issues. He was very sensitive to ‘insults’ and, sparked by a comment I had made about his financial situation, had swept the ornaments off my mantelpiece in a huff, breaking one of them. (Strangely, this could be considered progress. It gave us something to work on.) Christian, one of my Thursday clients, was stressed out by his job as a chef and weighed down by the responsibilities of being the father to two young children. He had described his wife, Odette, as ‘baby-mad’. He did not want any more kids, but she wanted as many as five.



‘Let’s pause here for today,’ I said.

We both stood up.

‘Thanks, that was great,’ she replied. ‘It was really useful to get my thoughts in order.’

Generally, the first session in any treatment is about describing the nature of the presenting problem rather than resolving anything. It usually helps the client just to get their problems off their chest.

There was a ten-minute break before the next appointment. My consulting room, I like to think, is homely and inviting. Aside from the standard accoutrements – diplomas on the walls, a box of tissues, a couch – it is painted in calming pastel shades. There are cushions on the chairs, a comfortable rug, various plants. I work in a suite of eight therapists in a small town in the Home Counties. My door leads to the waiting room, where there is a white noise machine, black-and-white photos and a water cooler.

Normally, I would write detailed chart notes between sessions or catch up with emails, but I needed to reset myself mentally. I was looking for the green light on the wall to go on. The light is connected to a button that clients press when they enter the waiting room. Like Bailie, I know all about guilt. Max, my three o’clock, was the final client of the day.

The time was 2.59 pm. I checked myself for the last time in the mirror.

There it was. Green for danger.

‘Hello, you!’ he greeted me.

He smelled of that lovely aftershave or whatever it was that he wore. As usual, he had brought his diary with him, containing events that had happened over the last week and issues



he wanted to discuss. Two years previously, his wife, Loretta, had died of pancreatic cancer. Their son Ben, then aged three, had been diagnosed with autism shortly after his mother's death. The first time I had met Max, I was intrigued to learn that he was an orchestral violinist. He had wanted to be a lead violinist – a concertmaster – but had been impeded in his ambitions by spending so much time looking after Ben. After the diagnosis of Ben's autism, Max had still been grieving his wife's death and had not, by his own admission, fully appreciated the difficulties of bringing up his son on his own. The seriousness of the situation had not properly registered until Ben had started school full-time, when he had seen the contrast with his son and the other pupils.

‘You seem in a good mood,’ I said, when he had settled himself on the couch.

‘I know!’ he replied. ‘What's wrong with me?’

He was sitting in a relaxed fashion with one leg balanced on his knee. He wore a powder blue shirt and a light grey jacket – nothing too showy, in fact quite commonplace – but he still somehow exuded a certain sex appeal. Why is it that one person can prompt feelings of excitement while somebody else can prompt nothing at all? One might talk about chemistry or, in the case of psychotherapy, associations with early relationships, but this unconscious psychological mapping is by its nature difficult to pin down.

He talked about Ben's one-to-one helper being off that week with illness. The school were using anyone who was available to replace her, including one of the cooks. Ironically, Ben had got on better with her than his normal helper.

‘Isn't that just like therapy?’ he said, smiling. ‘The relationship between the therapist and the client is more important than how much knowledge the therapist has or the strategy



they use.’

‘That’s quite true.’

‘Not that I’m saying that our relationship is like Ben’s with the lunch lady. In my humble opinion, not only do we get on but everything else, the analytical side of things, is A-plus as well.’

‘I’m glad you think so.’

‘Anyway, what I wanted to say was that Ben had a meltdown on Wednesday at school. The fire alarm went off as a test. He had been warned about it, but when it happened, he was still very shocked by the noise and became highly agitated. The school, as usual when he loses it like that, called me to come and pick him up. It’s annoying how they can’t try and deal with his problems by themselves. They know I’m at home most of the time and they take advantage of it.’ He sighed. ‘The thing is, as we were heading home, he started talking to me. A lot of his speech, as you know, is echolalia – just repeating phrases he’s heard before – but he was saying, I quote, “The noise of the alarm was loud. I find it hard.”’

‘Wow, that’s impressive!’

‘Isn’t it just? I must admit I shed a tear over how well his communication skills are coming along. That’s what sets me off these days, ironically – when things are going well or when somebody is being nice to us. We got back home, and I put him in front of his computer. He started jumping up and down with happiness, which set me off again.’

‘Did he see you crying?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘There is something about you today – in fact, I’ve noticed it recently – you seem



happier in general.’

‘I *am* happier. The key to it – you were right – is to accept Ben’s condition: try my best to help him, obviously, but not get hung up on what might have been.’

For the next few minutes, he talked about the importance he attached to our work together. When he had first seen me, he had been locked into his own private world. He did not think I had fully understood the nature of his depression, which was why he had fought everything I had suggested. Over time, though, his attitude had changed. The new life I had delineated for him perhaps wasn’t that bad after all.

I was thinking, listening to this, that I could easily have responded in kind. I had had no particular feelings for Max to begin with other than the fact that he was an easy client to work with, articulate and enthusiastic. Normally well-balanced, he had, quite understandably, been knocked off course by his wife’s death and the difficulties of being a single parent. (The only shortcoming I had noticed about him was a certain insecurity. He felt his parents, especially his mother, favoured his brother, whose two children were doing very well at school.) My attitude towards him had changed three weeks previously when he had noticed a couple of birthday cards on my desk from Albie, my husband, and Fern, my stepdaughter. He had come back after our session with a beginner’s bonsai tree and a card addressed to me, which he had left on the waiting-room table. (‘You have an admirer,’ Pippa, another therapist, said.) The card read, ‘To Grace, Happy Birthday to a warm-hearted, wise and wonderful person. Thank you, thank you, thank you! M xx’

Since that time, ridiculous though it sounds, I had been fantasising about getting together with him. I was captivated by the way he looked, the way he thought, the way he



spoke. Back home, I had googled him. There was not much to see apart from the cover photo of him on Facebook alongside Loretta and Ben. Loretta did not look unlike me. She had a similar figure and bobbed hair. To make things even trickier, Max and I seemed to be in tune with each other. I would barely begin an interpretation before he had understood what I was saying. I had to reassure myself that my feelings did not affect the way I handled his therapy or the way I behaved with him.

It was impossible, though, to deny the power imbalance between us. He was sharing his most intimate thoughts with me. Violating that trust would be completely unethical. The fact was that there were signs that his therapy was coming to an end. He appeared, as he did on this occasion, confident and purposeful. As his therapist, I was delighted by his progress.

‘Don’t you think we are on the same wavelength?’ he said.

‘I think we have a good therapeutic alliance,’ I responded.

‘Do you... Would you go as far as to say that you like me?’

Fortunately, I was not as thrown by this question as I might have been. (It is one I have been asked by other clients.) I replied that, yes, I did like him. I admired his love for his son, his intent to work on his depression, his self-deprecating sense of humour. His face fell – perhaps he was expecting me to say something else – but I nevertheless maintained my professionalism.

At the door when he was saying goodbye, he stood a little closer than normal, as we gazed warmly into each other’s eyes.

And then – just like that – he was gone.

I retraced my steps and practically fell into my chair. What an emotional rollercoaster.



I would not have anything more to do with him for a week. I felt a tug at my heart.

I pulled myself up a minute later and looked out of the window to see him heading off. Why, I asked myself for the umpteenth time, did I feel this way? Was something missing in my marriage?

The irony was that before Max came along, I had thought I was married to the perfect husband. Albie and I had booked a holiday in Cyprus later in the year to celebrate our tenth anniversary. Possibly, something in my psychological make-up responds to men in a nurturing role. Max, like Albie when I first met him, was a single dad.

Another question I regularly asked myself was whether I should share my feelings for Max with anyone. After Violet had bailed out on me, I had started to see a therapist called Francis. I invariably advise my clients to be open about everything. I tell them that a close relationship cannot survive when there are too many secrets. And yet I really did not want to tell Francis or Albie anything about Max! Francis might ask me to refer Max to another therapist. He would no doubt use the technical term for my feelings: erotic countertransference. I had learned about erotic countertransference during my training. It was something that Freud had encountered, as well as his disciples, Ferenczi and Jung.

Were my feelings for Max increased by the fact that such a relationship between a therapist and their client is forbidden (at least for a period of two to three years after the client has been terminated)?

[These are the first few pages of a longer story.]

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