

WRONG OBJECT

By Mona Simpson

He is a nondescript man. I'd never used that adjective about a client. Not until this one. My seventeenth. He'd requested an evening time and came Tuesdays at six-thirty. For months he didn't tell me what he did.

The first session I said what I often said to begin: How can I help you?

I still think of what I do as a helping profession. And I liked the way the phrase echoed down my years; in my first job I'd been a salesgirl at a department store counter.

I want to work on my marriage, he said. I'm the problem.

His complaint was familiar. But I preferred a self-critical patient to a blamer.

It's me, he said. My wife is a thoroughly good person.

Yawn, I thought, but said, Tell me more.

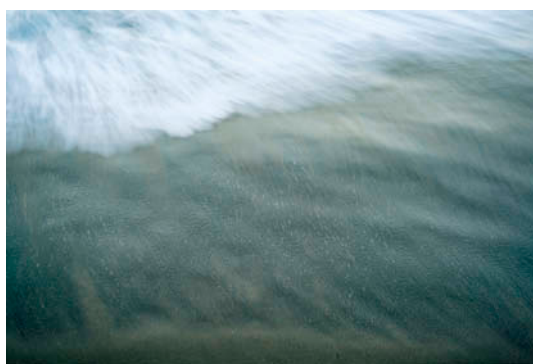
I don't feel what I should for her.

What do you feel?

Gratitude, I suppose. And when I think of leaving, pity.

What do you wish you experienced? He slumped in my old chair. (I'd just signed the lease; the furniture I'd ordered hadn't come yet.)

Mona Simpson is the author of six novels, most recently My Hollywood and Casebook. She is completing a new novel, The Asylum Years.



I don't feel enchantment . . . or the hope that we can make each other better. Married ten years, together thirteen. But I never had that.

That being enchantment.

He shrugged. All the things people say about being in love.

I never felt she was necessarily *the one*, he said.

The one, I repeated.

That we were destined for each other. Do you have children?

Three. How about you, Doc? Do you think love is just a solitary fantasy system?

I believe in the existence of good fits, I said.

I took notes after each session. Most therapists allow ten or fifteen minutes between patients, but I scheduled mine a half hour apart. That first year, I had a notebook in a different color for each. His was brown, and the pages for our first six sessions were almost empty.

Talks about wife, what a good person she is. Annoying.

The blankness I felt regarding this patient—I'll call him K—may have been his most distinctive quality. My notes on other patients ran long. I found K boring. I didn't particularly like him. And I liked having patients I liked.

From Week 9: *His wife (C) has an internal compass, whereas he's not lying and grabbing and snatch-ing because he's afraid of being caught.*

How do you know? I asked.

I noted that when he said "lyin' and grabbin' and snatchin'," he said it in caricatured Ebonics.

K visibly not black, I wrote.

If pressed, what could I have said? That K was slender and nearly bald. That he was in his forties. He dressed in the style of our southern California community: good hard shoes but no jacket. Often he wore a gray, collared sweater, soft, close fitting. Probably cashmere. I wondered where he bought it. The

shirts my husband chose faintly bothered me.

For the past eight years, K had been counsel for a transpacific company. I knew this because I'd googled; he still didn't talk about his work except once to tell me he'd have to cancel because he would be flying to Asia.

K devoted our sessions to his wife and the minor problems of the rich. He'd bought a painting that was possibly a fake. He winced talking about his relationship with the dealer.

I suggested that K cultivate dreams by keeping a notebook on the bedside table, but he claimed not to dream.

He liked his wife to color her hair. Was that wrong of him? He asked me this and didn't notice my hand going rogue to my head, where wiry white strands curled out from the dark.

He decided to buy her a purse. He actually unfolded a picture to show me. See, it's made to look like a plastic shopping bag from Chinatown.

I loved that purse.

Itold my supervisor about K at our monthly training session.

K had had a fight with his wife, who wanted the children to wash their own clothes. I'd said that everyone needs to learn how to do laundry. K had shrugged with a look of almost pleasurable guilt. I never did, he said.

What about in college?

Harvard has a laundry service, he said, flicking his wrist.

I hated him a little then. I'd not gone to Harvard. And I still did laundry. Too much of it. In that gesture of K's I saw what I feared a lot of people—my husband's family, maybe even my patrician supervisor—really thought of me: that I was less because I had been poor.

My supervisor was a very old, very tall man, a legend in the Los Angeles analytic community. He carried an aura of glamour, even then, in his eighties.

I told him about the purse.

I don't think you're less, he said. I admire you for having made your own way.

A lot of the time K bored me, I admitted.

My supervisor smiled, an expression of his never without a trace of

pain. In the Seventies, he said, a village priest asked the great Dr. Winnicott how to differentiate between a parishioner who could benefit from talking and someone who needed professional help. Winnicott said, if he is boring you, then he is sick and needs psychiatric treatment.

From the door, as I was leaving, I turned back to ask Dr. Bair, Where did you go to college?

The Farm, he answered. Then, seeing my confusion, he explained. Stanford; we used to call it the farm. I don't know if they still do.

That same day, in the coffee shop near my office, I saw the purse. A young mother had hooked it over her stroller handle.

I immediately searched for it online. Seventeen hundred dollars.

Another spat with his wife. K wanted to visit Alaska. His descriptions of the wildlife were tender, reverential. He wanted to see the willow ptarmigan's feathered feet. Snowy owls. Loons. The endangered Steller's eider. In a decade, he said, so much will be gone.

C said she planned to stay put.

I suggested that that sounded cold.

He defended her then, as if I'd attacked, which I suppose I had. She has more important responsibilities, he said, than swanning around the world with me.

Let's talk about our relationship, I said.

Our relationship? K said.

Yes. We've spent a good deal of time discussing your feelings about your wife. Let's consider what's going on right now in this room and whether or not that's satisfying. This is a relationship we could end without damage.

Our relationship, he said again. I hadn't really thought of us as having one. I'm all right with you, he mumbled.

Really? I said. Because I'm not sure I've been able to help you. Sometimes I feel we go over the same territory.

Well, that's probably my fault, he said. I haven't talked about everything. But I suppose that's what I'm here for.

And then he told me. At the time I had a pencil in my hand, and I wrote down the date: January 28, 2012.

I'm a pedophile, he said. The problem with my wife isn't ... I've never been enchanted with anyone her age. Which is to say my age.

The light in my office made him look dangerously thin, pretzeled on the corduroy chair. (My furniture had finally arrived. K was the only one of my clients to notice.) I was aware of the narrowness of his shoulders in the gray, collared sweater, the niceness of his socks.

All the hair on my arms stood up. There are questions I want to ask, I interrupted, but I need you to be aware, first, that in the state of California I will be required to report you if ...

Don't worry, he said. I've never touched a child. I never will. That's not why ... he shrugged. Not a possibility. I have too much to lose. And, he paused, it'd be wrong. I get that. I have three kids.

As he talked in an even voice I felt, for the first time, that we were in something together.

Okay, I said, sitting back. I had a hundred questions.

What age children? Girls or boys? When did this start? Were you abused?

That's what everybody'd probably think, right? But I don't think so. There were strange things, but ...

He was not completely bald. He had a kind of hair I'd seen around LA the past few years. What time had left had been shaved to the length of a crew cut, but one absolutely distinguishable from the military forms of that style. All of a sudden his look entered the lexicon of handsome. I'm getting old, I thought.

It seemed not only that I could fall in love with this person (in the way therapists fall in love, with the poignancy of renunciation) but that whatever that motion was, like a rope being shaken, it had already begun.

We spent the next month hunting down a sexual predator in K's past. I saw the population outside my office differently during that time. People in my coffee shop appeared heroic; I began to believe that many carried

damage and made it their purpose not to pass that damage on.

March 8 I quoted Auden in the brown notebook:

*I and the public know
What all schoolchildren learn
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.*

But not always, I scribbled.

We exhumed an inappropriate babysitter, a chubby fourteen-year-old with a contralto laugh who liked to lie over his lap and make him spank her, and a difficult mother (the opposite of C). But no real sexual evil. By the middle of the summer, we stopped trying.

If it's buried, it's buried deep, he said.

Why did you come to me when you did? I asked.

I called you because of a girl, he said. He hadn't in the least invited the situation. In fact, he avoided one-on-one time with his own daughters, he tended to take them places together, though he planned activities for himself with his son. I couldn't imagine that kind of carefulness with my children.

This girl, he said, followed him around at work for three weeks, as a project for school. And she fell for him, the eighth grader's crush so obvious it became a joke in the office. Even her father, the CFO, laughed about it. For K, this felt excruciating. Because there *was* a current between them, and she was showing it while he had to act as if it didn't exist.

She asked him for a three-day-a-week internship. He said no. She slows me down, he told her father. I spend all my time explaining the law. The CFO was offended because K had insufficiently gushed. Isabel, her name was. Everyone else in the office loves Izzy, the CFO pointedly said.

It was over now. He hadn't seen her or heard about her for eight months. He had never once asked her father what she was doing, or whether she'd trekked through Orange County for the Christmas bird count. She'd talked about that. She kept a notebook with her sightings of local birds. She'd told him about a population of wild red-crowned

parrots that had been growing since the Forties, when a flock escaped from a truck hurtling north from Mexico to a Bakersfield pet store. Now he read about birds whenever there was an article in the paper. He'd grown more attached to the family dog.

So you had your love story, I said.

I fell in love but in an impossible way.

That's what we call "wrong object." Our hope is to keep those feelings and direct them to someone else. (I said that, but I didn't know whether it was possible.)

Right object, he said. Well we all know who that would be. I sometimes think I love my dog more than my wife.

A generation ago, someone sat in a chair like mine and listened to a person talk about a different wrong object. In offices all over North America, psychiatrists attempted conversion therapies. My takeaway from those sad chapters of the history of psychology was that you could scare people and make them celibate, you could maybe stop them from doing what they had the urge to do, but it was nearly impossible to implant an alternate desire. The arc of gay liberation had a good ending, at least in California. But K's problem never could.

We'd already gone ten minutes over time and K was still talking when I told him we had to stop. He looked at me with gratitude as he stood. He seemed relieved. His secrecy was ending, but mine had just begun.

Now I knew there was a real child. I wished he hadn't told me her name.

Shrinks promise confidentiality, but everyone breaks that promise. I talked to my husband about patients, and not only to him. I'd once puzzled out a couple's case with my running partner. But I couldn't tell anyone about K; I didn't want to. I felt pretty sure no one would understand.

I spent a few hours on the internet. The case law was iffy. Child pornography was illegal and could have arguably been subject to mandatory reporting. I hoped he wasn't watching child porn.

MY LIFE IN THE SERVICE

THE WORLD WAR II DIARY OF
GEORGE MCGOVERN

Harold Arledge, Observer

With an introduction by Andrew J. Bacevich

MY LIFE IN THE SERVICE



MY LIFE IN THE SERVICE
FEATURES A FACSIMILE OF
THE DIARY GEORGE MCGOVERN
KEPT FROM HIS FIRST DAYS OF
BASIC TRAINING TO THE END OF
THE WAR. HASTILY JOTTED IN
HIS EXACTING HAND (A TYPED
TRANSCRIPTION IS INCLUDED),
THE PAGES CONVEY THE
IMMEDIACY OF MCGOVERN'S
WARTIME EXPERIENCES.

INTRODUCTION BY
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I slid into bed next to my sleeping husband.

I may have been honor bound to tell my supervising analyst, but Dr. Bair was leaving for a nine-week writing retreat in Scotland, where he planned to devote himself to a memoir in verse about his first marriage, to a wife who died young.

Over the next weeks, K told me about his first object. We talked in it and around it, the way music reorganizes itself. We added a second session, Thursday mornings.

The summer he was thirteen K had fallen in love with a friend of his sister's, a girl named Anna Li. His family had rented a house in Malibu, and he followed the two girls everywhere. The ends of her hair touched her hips. She had stick legs, dark compared with his own freckled skin. He was a geek then, he told me, with acne. I thought I would grow out of that and be one of those guys who had a beautiful younger wife, he said. His mother, in fact, was a beautiful wife, sixteen years younger than his father. The three children slept on a porch cantilevered over sand, and heard the thunder of rippling waves all night long.

Anna Li's wrist had brushed against his, but that was all until the day before he left (his parents had decided to return home early), when the three waded into the ocean and his sister ran back to get a popsicle from the refrigerator. He watched her trudging up the sand and thought her bum was too big. Anna tied her hair up in a knot by touch alone, her elbows out to the sides of her ears. He was standing but just barely, with ridged sand under his feet; the waves lifted him up and down; it was like jumping without gravity. Their bodies found each other and he felt her legs waving underwater, like sea fronds, then her knees touching both sides of him. She placed her hands on his shoulders, which were rising up and down, too. She kissed him, and the inside of her mouth tasted of melon, the musky flavor he hadn't liked but now did. The smell of sea, the knob of her ankle on his back, her hands

light on his shoulders, bobbing up and down with the surf. They laughed, looking at each other because they fit. Then, suddenly, a huge wave came and unlatched them, hurled them tumbling in foam, and when they emerged nine feet apart her face was covered with her netted hair, the rubber band lost to the sea.

His mother, in a yellow blouse, stood waving from the deck; his sister was returning, her splayed feet sinking in the sand with each step. The sun puckered the surface of the ocean. Their eyes shone; their hair plastered against their skin. He left for New York with his family the next day and never saw her again.

She runs a cosmetics company now, he said.

But the age of the girls he loved did not march up the staircase with him. He'd desired a thirteen-year-old when he was thirteen, when he was in high school, then when he was in his twenties and thirties. The penchant never changed. He'd married at thirty-six.

I asked if he'd thought of telling C then. He hadn't. I mean how would you bring it up? By the way, I'm not really all that attracted to you?

I thought that he could tell her now, but what if she ran out of the house with the children and hired a divorce lawyer?

I read about a Canadian psychiatrist who'd closed down his practice and sent former patients, on whom he'd attempted conversion therapy, letters of apology with refund checks. Eventually the doctor went bankrupt.

My supervisor summoned me for one last meeting before he left for Scotland. He had a fire going in his office fireplace. I'd never known it worked. Gas, he said when I stared. He always offered me coffee during our sessions, and I accepted, though it was late afternoon. He wore a flannel shirt under his suit jacket and hiking boots, already dressed for his retreat. He efficiently ran through each of my patients. He asked me about K only once.

What about the purse?

I told him the truth: I'd forgotten it.

He's not boring you anymore?

No, I said.

I wished him well on his book, hoping I would see him again. At his age, I couldn't be sure.

And then it was just K and me. What does it mean to be a non-acting "minor-attracted person"? I asked, which is what he'd started to call himself.

For some people, I suppose, it would mean they can't have sex. Not real sex.

But that's not you, I said. You're not celibate.

Not exactly.

With that qualifier, it seemed I'd bitten a tip of cardboard.

If a guy in a bar says, My wife and I have great sex, and his buddy says, Meh, ours is so-so, what does that even tell you? Maybe the one's so-so would have been the other's nirvana.

I asked about his fantasies.

It's pretty much always the same, he said. We're in water. She's skinny, teasing. She coaxes me. I have to be pulled into the game. No face usually. But a girl. That body.

Do you think of this fantasy to become aroused with your wife?

My running partner once told me she had to imagine being raped to come and the ickiness bothered her so much that orgasms didn't seem worth the trouble. She'd read about arousal reconditioning in a women's magazine. In the Sixties, psychologists had patients masturbate to a favorite fantasy and then replace that with something more acceptable just seconds before climax, when it was too late to stop. Gradually, they pulled the switch back, until finally, the idea went, the patient wouldn't need the fantasy at all. But arousal reconditioning therapy failed—at least, it failed to make gay people straight.

My running partner said she couldn't completely obliterate the need for violence, but now she only required a minute or two. I'd also read about satiation training, which was kind of the opposite. Patients masturbated to their favorite fanta-

sies over and over again until they wore them out.

I'll try number one, K said, now that we're picking from discredited therapies. How many times a week do I have to do this?

Two or three, I said.

She's gonna wonder what's gotten into me.

He had been having sex with his wife all along, but not a lot. Still, he said, not appreciably less than their friends. Unlike with those couples, though, K was the one who demurred. Sometimes during dinners out, the men made jokes about missing the sex-rich time before marriage, looking at their wives with blame. This humiliated his wife.

But after two weeks of the regime and K's apparently newfound appetite, they laughed together about their previous imbalance.

At the end of five weeks, C called a moratorium.

This is a little too much for me, she told him. Instead, she signed them up for a Ligurian cooking class. The chef would come to them.

How had it worked?
I don't know, he said. Without the fantasy, her naked face was like an old friend.

K had an unusually large mouth. His lips pressed together in an exaggerated tight smile, which he held a moment then let down. Oh, that's a grimace, I realized. Sometimes I understood what a word meant from reading but had never met it in life.

I asked again whether he could tell her. I thought it was worth the risk. But he didn't want to.

You've never asked me about porn, he said.

I raised a hand, meaning Stop.

He waved me off. I always knew it was out there, he said. Last night, I finally watched one on my computer. The thing felt homemade. There was a girl, eleven or twelve. She looked poor. More young than pretty. It was supposed to be her first time. You could see she was scared. He was much bigger and rough. The guy was hurting her, and you could see he wanted to.

He was getting off on her fear. I closed my computer to stop it.

My fantasy, he said, it was never that at all.

He returned to his first concern: his marriage.

Okay, so I don't have the sparkle, he said, or whatever that is. But my question is still the same. Do I love her enough? The problem is choice. If you turn away from your instincts, you're left with rationality, essentially with shopping. There is something repellent about deciding to pick a person that way. This one's a wonderful cook. That one looks great dressed up. The other one's fluent in three languages but disorganized.

Isn't that more or less what we all do? I said.

Really?

Well, few of us marry paraplegics.

You married a paraplegic? He asked.

No. I did the usual thing.

Maybe we're done, K said. The one thing we haven't tried is telling your wife.

He shook his head. This is enough for me. Why should she have to learn

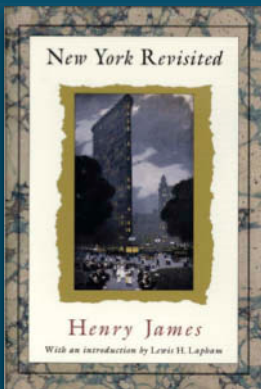
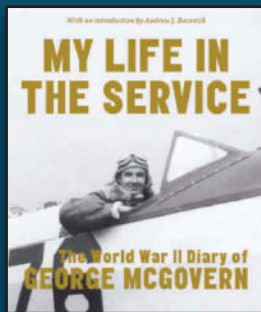
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that she had her children with a monster? She could have married plenty of other guys.

I'd written statistics on a three-by-five index card. But what could I say: You are not alone?

After that the life went out of our sessions. He canceled frequently for trips, more family trips, I noted, fewer business. He no longer seemed miserable. By the summer, he'd stopped coming altogether. That might have been the happy end of our story.

Dr. Bair eventually returned from Scotland, where he'd broken a leg, walking on a rocky crag. The footsteps, he said, helped his prosody. He'd had to spend the last six weeks of his retreat in a Swiss rehabilitation facility. This time no fire burned in the marble fireplace of his office. He offered coffee as usual, but I declined, in deference to the plastic boot on his leg. I summarized my cases, skipping lightly over K's termination.

I'm still not getting a clear sense of your work with him, he said. I always thought something would emerge from all that boredom.

Maybe now that it was over, I could tell him more. I wanted to talk about K. None of my current patients engaged me as much.

I looked at Dr. Bair's long face, pale and weaker from his trip, and remembered him saying, I don't think you're less. I decided to trust him. I started to describe our work, what we'd accomplished, what we'd left unfinished.

But his gaze focused. His eyebrows rose. I'm surprised at you, he said.

He never touched a minor. He came to get help.

According to his own report. Did he engage in pornography?

I could have lied. Well, only once, I finally said. I tried to remember my statistics. There are something like four million child-porn websites. And he hated it. He didn't do anything, I said, too loud. He came to me to learn how to live with these feelings. If something happened to him for seeking help that would be a really bad thing.

I saw I'd made a mistake. I wanted to ask him to promise he wouldn't report K, but instead I flattered him, asking how his work on the memoir had gone, whether he'd been able to finish.

He shook his head and told me that he'd made some progress, but not as much as he'd hoped.

A few weeks later, on a Tuesday evening, there was a knock on my office door. A woman introduced herself as Catherine.

Someone had reported her husband, she told me. There had been an investigation. He hadn't done anything, she said, and so of course he'd been cleared.

I thought of explaining that it wasn't me who'd reported him, but it was anyway, I supposed, my fault.

K had obviously told her almost everything. What I'd hoped for had come true; she stood here his ally, her black hair pulled back in a ponytail. They were no doubt closer from their mutual rage. She was stately, truly beautiful with large Grecian features. She was not carrying the purse that looked like a plastic shopping bag but dressed with classical good taste: a knit suit, modest heels at the end of long slim calves. He'd never once told me that C was beautiful, her proportions probably wasted on him. I'm sure he hadn't thought of me in those terms at all.

I'm sorry, I said. I didn't want this to happen.

He feels terribly betrayed, she said. We both do.

I left my office, taping a note on the door to cancel my later session, and I meandered on residential streets, walking in and out of pockets of sound, leaf blowers, illegal but still used everywhere here, and occasionally a choir of birds under an inexplicably hospitable tree. I'd started noticing birds. Without meaning to, K had given me the inclination. It may have been all K still had from the girl. I thought about Dr. Bair. I was just a beginner and he was an eminence. But our relationship wasn't what I'd believed.

At least Isabel, the girl, had been spared. No doubt by now she'd forgotten her crush. Perhaps she'd begun dating, in the way of our high schoolers, via texts and Instagram. I wondered if she'd kept her love of birds. ■