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Sondra Spatt Olsen

SHRINK

“Well, my childhood was very tranquil.”

“No childhood is ever tranquil.”

Ina is telling her earliest memories to a shrink, Dr. Gregory. The memories are scanty, lacking drama or narrative appeal, and as Ina, ordinarily so glib, stops and stammers and starts again, she feels more and more like an under-achiever. She sits in a warm bath of sunshine facing the woman whose short gray hair and pleasant face with its non-threatening, non-committal expression lie in deep shadow across the desk. Although only in her second session, Ina already thinks of Dr. Gregory as DG or Dark Goblin.

Ina still doesn't see how describing her childhood is going to solve her main problem: should she continue seeing her current boyfriend, who is desirable or not desirable—she can't make up her mind. Formerly an untroubled sleeper, she now wakes up at 1:25, 3:40, 5:15 with startling nightmares.

“I'd like to get to know you a bit more,” is what DG says. “Tell me about some very early memories.”

Ina obediently describes seeing her mother's tiny face in the window high up in the obstetrics wing, the Abraham Abrahams Pavilion of Jewish Hospital, the “Oy Oy” Pavilion, as a pharmacist in Brooklyn once described it to Ina. This anecdote about her mother which Ina has always thought amusing suddenly forces tears from her eyes. She shoots a furious glance at DG, who says, “You probably felt lonely. They kept women in bed for eight days after childbirth in those days. Eight days is a long time for a small child to be without her mother.”

Ina tells how she had to sleep on a folding cot in Aunt Yetta's living room. In the morning Yetta asked the never-to-be-forgotten question: What do you want for breakfast, Rice Krispies or Cream of Wheat?

Ina asked for Rice Krispies. What she got was Cream of Wheat. Twenty five years later, Ina understands that Yetta probably found the cupboard empty of Rice Krispies *after* Ina's order, but this perception hasn't altered her deeply held belief: it's useless to choose what you really desire.

“Yetta had no children and was always overwhelming. She'd crush me to her bosom and say, *mamaleh . . . mamanu*—scary! I'd like to know why I

didn't stay with my lovely grandma who arrived the next week to take care of the new baby?"

Ina sounds to herself like a horrid *kvetch*, a whiner, not the stoic heroine of her fantasies. "What I would really like to talk about is Larry," Ina says diffidently. "*He's* what's keeping me up at night."

She thinks about LL all the time, Lusty Larry, her special name. No one in the world will ever know about Ina's nicknames, which like the rest of her secrets are small, meaningless and totally under her control.

"Go ahead."

"Larry is about thirty and rich. Rich is very attractive I'm surprised to find out. *He* could afford therapy. *He's* been after me for a long time."

But she's mentioned all this in the first session.

"You don't find him physically attractive?"

"Beyond belief! When he kisses me, I feel complete meltdown. He has soft warm hands and is very knowing about where to put them."

DG stares at Ina with a quizzical expression that Ina interprets as "Boy, do you have a problem!"

"So Larry is too sexy?"

"I feel he's taking me over. I don't trust his intensity. He's a little like a spoiled child. Once I give in, he'll lose interest. My resistance is what he loves."

"Does he remind you of anyone?"

Ina ignores the question. "Last summer I ran away. With money I saved by living at home, I bought a ticket on the Greek Line. I made it clear I didn't want to see Larry or think about him, but he kept pursuing me with flowers—first a bouquet delivered before the ship left New York, and then another, even bigger one, in Lisbon. They just appeared in my cabin. At first I was flattered by the attention, but then there was one in Naples and one in Crete and my tiny space was stuffed with flowers and they were stealing all my oxygen. That's what the steward said. Just the fragrance kept me from sleeping. Also I couldn't help thinking—flowers are cheap in the Mediterranean.

"When I left the ship in Piraeus, a boy put another bouquet in my arms. Stiff horrible gladioli. So I threw them in the trash can. That was satisfying, very satisfying. Another problem with Larry—he's married now."

DG betrays her interest with a little flicker of her eyelashes. "You like married men?"

“Not usually. It’s not what you think. Larry married while I was going with him.”

DG’s eyebeams say something like “Quack, Quack.” “How did that happen?” she asks, maintaining her neutral tone.

Ina admires her self-control. If Ina were the shrink, she also would show her mastery of the face. Ina would be superb at it, too. Pity; only her own problems baffle her.

“I was a freshman in college when I met Larry, visiting a friend in Great Neck. My friend’s mother warned me against him. Very emphatically she said—Watch out! He’s notorious in this community. He made Gloria Shapiro pregnant and wouldn’t marry her. A Jewish Don Juan. Gloria had to have a you-know-what.

“But I dated him anyway out of plain curiosity. Forewarned, forearmed. We danced at The Rainbow Room and a few other places I had to buy a whole new wardrobe for. And he drove a Triumph! The red lights seemed to turn green by magic as we rode down Fifth Avenue. When I said I didn’t want to see him again, he got *really* interested.”

“So at heart you don’t care for him?”

“Don’t trust him. My heart is very fragile. When you’re vulnerable, you have to protect yourself. I mean, protect yourself.”

DG nods.

“Finally, he stopped calling. Five years passed. Truly I forgot about him. One day I passed a shop window with a dashing green Borsalino hat, and I thought, Larry would look great in that hat. And that night he telephoned. That’s remarkable, isn’t it?”

DG nods.

“Now he takes me to even more expensive places, but this time, luckily, I’m older and have the wardrobe for it. Also, since we first met, the sexual revolution has taken place.”

Ina wants to confide her pet theory—that it was the invention of panty hose, leading to the mini-skirt, that started the sexual revolution. She will never forget the expression on LL’s face when he put his hand on her leg and went up up up without encountering a garter, but she knows that telling a shrink anything but the main idea will trash her bank account.

“So you’re sleeping with him?”

“My actual sex life is a delicate matter I’m not sure I want to discuss yet,” Ina says darkly. “I’m a very private person.”

Dark Goblin nods again. “Your attitude toward sex seems crucial here, you agree? That’s why I wanted to know about your family. An older woman, a mother, warns you about sex with Larry and ever afterward you feel uncomfortable with him.”

“I don’t want to get pregnant. I do know he’s talented at impregnating people. Actually, I’m taking birth control pills, so that’s a red herring.”

Ina is not about to say that she is probably the only Pill taker in the free world who is also a virgin. She’s ready for any contingency, she feels, but not today. Sex preoccupies her thoughts, but she’s unwilling to go all the way. When someone at school used the phrase “cocktease” to describe Hedda Gabler, Ina blushed bright scarlet.

“Anyway, we saw each other a few times. He took me out on his boat and to hear Artur Rubenstein play Chopin and for a lobster lunch in Philadelphia. Then one day he called and he wasn’t his usual suave self. He was stammering. He’d told me about his last girlfriend who left him. A U.S. champion bobsledder. After she’d left him, five months later, she discovered she was pregnant.”

A definite look of skepticism crosses DG’s face. Ina wonders if DG is really a good analyst. She’s much too interested in what’s going on. *Yenta* is the word that occurs to Ina, busybody.

“Because she’s so skinny and athletic; she’s always training and never gets her period. Plausible? Anyway, Larry does the right thing and marries her. To give his baby a name the way they do in novels.”

“Old-fashioned novels.”

“Larry married Phyllis on Sunday afternoon in Englewood and that night he and I were in a restaurant and while we’re eating chicken marsala, he’s describing the wedding to me. Usually Larry’s ebullient, but that night he was languid and depressed. We sat on my sofa and he put his head in my lap. We just sat for a long time without saying anything, and I liked him much better than I did before. He seemed less like a bulldozer. Since then I haven’t been able to sleep much. ‘I’m frustrated,’ he told me, ‘because what I really want to do is marry you.’”

“What did you reply?”

“I didn’t. In any case, he can’t marry me because he has to be married to her till she gives birth.”

“Are you sure he’s telling the truth about this?”

“Well, he’s spending all his time with me. Friday night, Saturday night and Sunday? Wouldn’t he be with *her* if it wasn’t In Name Only? It’s more like a movie than a novel, with Barbara Stanwyck.

“All this was too stressful, too much intensity, so I bought a ticket on the Greek Line and got pursued by flowers. I was away all summer and when I came back he had a baby daughter named Samantha, but he still wanted me. So I told him, ‘I can’t see you because I’m too confused. I’m going to see a shrink and get myself straightened out.’ So here I am. What do you think I should do?”

“I can’t tell you what to do.”

“No?”

“My function is to help *you* clarify your feelings. Right now the most helpful thing you can do is to tell me about your childhood.”

That night Ina dreams she’s standing in front of a large toilet bowl dropping in twenty dollar bills. The next night she’s traveling to a crucial job interview but doesn’t know the address. She finds herself on the platform of a foreign elevated line cunningly arranged without supporting members. In confusion she asks an old lady which train to take. “That one—” the wrinkled old thing replies.

Ina dashes in just as the train doors close. While they’re pulling away, she finds she’s heading in the wrong direction.

“Does the old lady remind you of anyone?” DG asks. Doesn’t she ever tire of her unsubtle question?

“Nope.”

“Someone you think is pointing you in the wrong direction? No? Perhaps you think *I’m* pointing you the wrong way?”

“But *you’re* not old!”

DG gives Ina a really sweet smile.

DG’s office on the fourteenth floor of a grand old apartment house on Central Park West—The Splendide—is the most luxurious place Ina ever frequents.

At the next session, as she enters the lobby for her regular eleven a.m. appointment, the cadaverous doorman in tightly buttoned collar and creased white gloves steps into her path.

“I’m sorry—both elevators have broken down. They’re working on them, but you’ll have to use the freight elevator now. Please follow.”

A young fellow in a hunter green uniform with “Dragan” written in yellow on the pocket moves from behind the door and without looking at Ina darts away. She trails him across the lobby and down a corridor. “In’ear,” he says roughly. Ina steps into an elevator swaddled in musty gray quilted padding.

Dragan brings her to a tiny vestibule. A few steps across Ina sees a dusty door flanked by a stained dented garbage can topped with a stack of frayed *New York Times*. It’s the kitchen door, obviously, the back of DG’s apartment.

Ina steps out, Dragan clangs the gate shut and the elevator descends. Ina gingerly pushes the back door buzzer, but there’s no answer.

Ina rings again.

Still no answer. Ina presses her finger to the button and buzzes long and angrily, at the same time pressing her head to the door to see if the doorbell is really ringing. No sound penetrates the dusty wood. No ring. No footsteps. Nothing.

Obviously the doorbell isn’t working. In DG’s elegant apartment with stout walls and thick carpets, no rumpus in the garbage entry will ever be heard in the treatment room. Ina has been resentful of DG’s residential luxe purchased by Ina’s own hard-earned pitiful wage as an adjunct teacher of English. She’s surprised that DG’s back door is so cheesy. At these prices!

Ina’s hand is covered with filth. She tears off a piece of *New York Times* and tries to brush herself off, but newsprint comes off instead and she’s more soiled than before. Yugh!

She spins to touch the freight elevator button. Out of here! She’ll call DG from the lobby. Because Ina is already late for the appointment, she’s feeling desperately sorry for herself in a way she recognizes and loathes. She’s about to be victimized. She feels her victim’s fate dropping over her like the musty gray quilting in the freight elevator.

Ina knows that DG will not give her any extra time. This stern decree was explained at length and in full at the first meeting (for which Ina was paying full price). There are no discounts in the shrink business.

Ina’s appointed fifty minutes are sacred, hers alone, DG explained, to be used wholly according to Ina’s desire. But DG has a difficult teaching schedule and a long list of satisfied patients. Ina’s session can never be made up if missed and certainly never extended no matter how urgent her feelings and wishes. (The sacred minutes can be shortened or skipped—Ina understands with a tweak of rage—as long as they are paid for.)

Out of here! But where's the elevator? Ina presses her cheek to the filthy metal, hears the buzzer ringing angrily, but no sound of movement stirs the shaft. All is tranquil. All is still.

Shit! As Ina rings, her blood is pounding, head aching, pressure rising.

Ina thinks she knows what's happened. The repairman has fixed the self-service elevator and Dragan has gone back to his sweeping in some other part of the building. She's trapped.

Ina turns to bang DG's door with all the force of her feeble fists and lightweight sandals. Bang Crack Bang. Surely DG has a husband or lover or child in that apartment (not that she would ever tell Ina the secrets of her domestic life), and surely she has some support staff to bring her snacks between patients and to dust the couch. Or maybe not. Ina stops kicking. Perhaps DG may take advantage of Ina's lateness to wander back to the refrigerator for a glass of ginger ale and a canapé.

Or maybe not. Maybe she will continue to see patients for many hours and then leave for a long expensive meal with a colleague from the INSTITUTE.

Ina suddenly feels desperately tired and thinks about slowly sinking to the chipped gray-painted floor and leaning her boiling head against the garbage can. Probably today is not a garbage collection day; the service elevator will not be in use again until tomorrow morning. Ina may be stuck here all night. She stares at the bare dirt-flecked bulb above her head and sees it slowly flickering out at two a.m. Ina will be in the dark, all right, complete darkness, not just psychological darkness.

No one in Manhattan will know how to rescue her, not her glamorous boyfriend, not her mother . . . soon the rats will creep out of their cunning holes and begin to rub softly across her body, dragging softly across her hair, her neck. Roaches as well.

The minutes thud by. Ina begins to emit a strange sound, part sob, part squeak. Why can't she roar, dammit? Why must she be such a victim? She rises on tiptoe, prepares for screams, prepares for throwing her whole body against the kitchen door. Her clothes will be ripping and falling from her shoulders. Her throat will be ripped with screaming HELP! Yes, she's going to really let loose. Meanwhile she keeps squeaking.

Suddenly the door behind her clangs, and she sees the frightened face of Dragan peering out, his mouth open wide in astonishment.

"Wot? Wot?" he says followed by a stream of Croatian or Turkish or wotever he speaks.

Ina grinds her teeth, clenching hard, a massive show of bruxism. Into the elevator she races without a word.

Dragan drops the elevator down a floor or two and reopens the gate. “Rong fluor,” he says. She realizes she’s been banging on the wrong door.

If she utters a single syllable, Ina knows she will lose control, fall upon Dragan and murder him and end up in jail. She will not even let her gaze rest on him lest he suddenly burst into flame.

The elevator is now facing a neat clean landing below a short flight of stairs. Dragan points upward. “Hugo,” he says.

Ina stalks up to the immaculate white-painted door at the top of the stairs. DG appears, poised and neat as always in tweedy skirt and blouse with silken ruff, her face a mask of calm. “Please come in.”

The large light-filled flat feels like a funhouse; does Ina lurch as she enters the luxe treatment room from an unusual direction? Was that clicking sound ceramic tiles in the corridor under her feet or her brain misfiring?

Catching sight of herself in a gilt-edged mirror, Ina sees a long smear of black on her cheek—charcoal from the wreckage, a bit of flack from the bombing raid. The brass-bound mantel clock tells her she’s missed three quarters of her session.

Ina reaches the patient’s chair placed at a far distance from the shrink’s desk. DG has undoubtedly been attacked by some previous patient and is afraid that it will happen again.

She seats herself. As Ina is about to grasp the arm of her chair, she sees she’s still carrying a crumpled mass of newspaper about the size of a grenade in her clenched fist. She relaxes her fist and lets the newspaper fall to the floor. It doesn’t make the loud satisfying detonation she desires. Nothing is going to blow up here. Her therapy is going nowhere, and neither is she.

“I was trapped in a garbage entryway for half an hour,” Ina says in a cold remote voice. “You ought to speak to your building staff to keep the next patient from undergoing the same treatment.”

“I’m sorry,” DG says. “And about Larry?”