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The View From The Couch

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In Bonnie Friedman’s memoir about seven years of therapy, she follows Freud and reads the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis: communicate everything that comes to mind. Do not exclude any idea because it is too disagreeable, indiscriminate, irrelevant, or nonsensical. The Thief of Happiness includes interchanges with her pseudonymous psychoanalyst Dr. Harriet Singh, a psychiatrist of childhood memories, assorted musings about love and life, and feverish fantasies. Friedman reports sundry details of meals, shopping trips, phone conversations and household chores. She puts readers in the position of the psychoanalyst who must locate what Freud called “precious metal” buried in the “many tons of ore” that free association produces. Those who prefer stories with discernible plots will throw up their hands. But there is method to Friedman’s madness: although she risks sounding self-indulgent, there is no more truthful way to tell a psychoanalysis.

As Freudian topics of psychodynamic therapy, transference—the emotionally charged relationship between therapist and patient—was the pivot of the therapy. Dr. Singh was remote, austere and sparring in her words. Apart from her wardrobe—blue skirts, starched white blouses and riding boots—Friedman knew little about her. This left ample room for her unconscious to run free, which is precisely the effect Singh intended. Friedman was instantly propelled into a hypnotic state of “Little mattered now besides Harriet Singh. Everyone else was merely metaphoric.” Singh encouraged this absorption: “If I say I feel some affection for you, I mean it, and you respond, ‘You felt lonely for me, and I know she’s right. A journalist...writes me a flirtatious letter and I compose a flirtatious reply. Don’t send it to him,” she advises. ‘It’s meant for me.’”

As the years wore on, Friedman’s feelings for Dr. Singh grew more complicated and volatile, careening from slavish admiration to resentment to disillusion. Nonetheless, she remained besotted. Even when Friedman came to see Singh as a “traitor of happiness,” the psychoanalyst’s hold remained tenacious and the attachment difficult to sever.

In the century since Freud proposed transference love, psychoanalysts have not only recognized it in a number of ways. Transference is now broadly construed to encompass the full range of emotions that come into play in self-other relationships inside and outside therapy. Many analysts now understand not only as the residue of early childhood but also as continually reshaped through daily living. Many theorists no longer focus narrowly on the patient’s emotional baggage: instead they view the therapist’s role as mediating the psychoanalytic process in which both psyche mutually influence each other.

Friedman’s notions of transference, in contrast, hew closely to Freud’s early formulations. She portrays her years in treatment as a time when mysterious forces gripped her psychic life. Like tor- nadoes, they seemed to touch down without warning. They took their toll on her marriage, friendships, psychic equilibrium and even physical health, while she felt powerless to curb them. Then, unaccountably, the forces dissipated. Friedman seems to find the gains she made in psychoanalysis equally mysterious and unveled. She says, for example, “I told my surprise, I turned into a person who could think judiciously.” In her view, psychoanalysis is akin to witchcraft, and she sums up the experience as a “suspiciously useful...spiritual apprenticeship.” But attributing so much power to psychoanalysis kept her from dismissing her own agency.

Readers may well ask what actually happened in Friedman’s therapy. Did she change because of her therapy or in spite of it? Her writer’s block—the problem for which she entered therapy—persisted two weeks. Why did she stay in therapy for seven additional years? Was analysis a trap that sidetracked her from productive and healthy living? Or did it ultimately enable her to write, live zestfully and rekindle a humdrum marriage? These questions have no easy answers. This is why scientifically-trained practitioners and (cost-conscious managed-care companies) are wary of psychoanalysis.

We will read The Thief of Happiness as a story of self-discovery, spiritual growth and healing. Others will read it as a grim tale of humbuggery. At one point, Friedman herself permits Dr. Singh—"the great Gatsby of Psychoanalysis"—the "Wizard of Oz". Was Dr. Singh brilliant or inept? Was she deluded by her ego ideal? Psychoanalysis, after all, implies that reality is never what it appears to be. I must underscore that Friedman’s emotions with psychoanalysis were not at all typical. Even among psychoana- lysts, the orthodox form that Dr. Singh espoused has been on the wane for several decades. To keep an individual especially one who had no significant clinical psychopathology, in treatment for seven years is a dubious practice. And the author herself has described therapy as "having largely given way to a more active, conversational, egalitarian one. In Friedman’s telling, Singh’s pronounce- ments often stayed stagey and her interpretations cryptic. Indeed, her remarks sometimes sound like a parody of ther- apeutic arrogance. One example: Friedman wrote that she was pregnant until treatment was

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over, she might be too old to conceive. "Have you and Paul considered adoption?" Sing responded.

It's difficult to see what Friedman offers to a feminist audience. The *The Thief* of a book about relationships among women—Friedman and her mother, sister, girlfriends and therapist. Friedman's difficulties with ambition, self-doubt, self-definition, invisibility and all gendered dimensions. But she does not draw on gender as a framework for understanding her experiences. Nor, evidently, was feminism a part of the social worlds she moved in.

Dr. Sing, it seems, slept through feminism's poetic sensibility. Her clients' fictional stories of loss and pain are monochrome pictures and glittery imagery. When the question of changing to another therapist arose, Sing's response was swift and succinct: "Switching therapists is like switching cars." To broach the topic of termination ("When will you ever let me leave?") Sing said, "Your very readiness is a sign that you have more work to do."

Lovers of language may relish Friedman's poetic sensibility. Her clients' fictional stories are lush with italics and light imagery. When the language works, the effect is incandescent. Consider this admirable description of her sister's handwriting: "a parade of flourishes and caresses, whole sentences holding their breath, em dashes and commas without pattern or sense."

First-person accounts of therapy are not plentiful. Although therapists often tell us little about the ways in which they work, they have often provided interesting insights about their clients' experiences. Some therapists, such as Friedman, scrupulously avoided self-disclosure, feeling that such accounts were strained: "clients experience therapy. Some therapists report the Sandinistas. Lovers of language may relish Friedman's poetic sensibility. Her clients' fictional stories are lush with italics and light imagery. When the language works, the effect is incandescent. Consider this admirable description of her sister's handwriting: "a parade of flourishes and caresses, whole sentences holding their breath, em dashes and commas without pattern or sense."

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ike many other North Americans and other "internationalists" from Latin America, Japan and Western Europe, I spent a lot of time during the Reagan years either in Nicaragua or organizing solidarity against the Contra war. Following the July 1979 Sandinista Revolution that dislodged the Somoza dictatorship and its cruel National Guard from power, activists from the sixties movements along with a new generation of anti-imperialists, including huge numbers of American lesbian and gay activists, flooded Nicaragua in response to the Sandinistas' call for international brigades to assist with a literacy program and help rebuild the war-torn and impoverished nation of 2.5 million people.

I didn't get to experience the first euphoric moment. With the first half of the 1980s, the United States government under Jimmy Carter, began its project to banish the Sandinistas and to restore Somocismo without a democratic alternative. This was the time in which the FSLN was deprived of the aspiring to be a political movement. It resonates with the experiences of the critical mass of women who became Sandinistas—nearly half the combatants and clandestine activists by the time the war was assumed to be won.

I n some ways, Belli's story is a collective memoir, reflecting the experiences of thousands of professionals and upper-class young women and men who abandoned privileged lives to join was, at its base, a mass peasant-revolutionary movement. It resonates with the experiences of the critical mass of women who became Sandinistas—nearly half the combatants and clandestine activists by the time the war was assumed to be won.

The Sandinista Revolution was not the only national insurgency to coincide with the Women's Liberation Movement. In the eighties, women in Latin America, Asia, and elsewhere were striving to forge women's liberation movements in the Northeastern, and specifically without a feminist consciousness that allows women to fulfill their revolutionary consciousness (anti-imperialist and pro-working class) and their newfound feminist consciousness. Sandinista women who adopted gendered identities and their choices. These women also brought a feminist consciousness to the poorer women they worked with. This was one of the reasons that thousands of North American and Western European feminists were drawn to support the Sandinistas.

Belli convincingly argues that there would not have been a successful revolutionary process. In his rave review in the *New York Review of Books* on the first volume of *The Magic Daughter*, a depiction of multiple personality disorder but Friedman takes a different path, and for this she should be praised after book is not a brief for psychoanalysis. She has no diagnosis to flout, only ordinary miseries. Lying on Dr. Sing's couch, she inevitably seems myopic, her perspective reaches only as far as her stockinged feet. She often sounds self-absorbed, petulant and childish. Yet to understand the book's worth, one must consider the uncertain and radical project. To compose a portrait of the experience is an act of courage, and to share the portrait an act of generosity.