

## Active Listening

"Welcome back, Dell. Have a seat."

"Sure."

It had been nearly 3 months of therapy and up to this point, Dell had felt like he was always putting the pieces together for his psychiatrist.

"Well, I imagine that is a part of it."

"Hmmm". She would nod, adding nothing.

"Sure, having a younger brother... a younger, better looking brother with *all* the talent. Hell, I imagine that is contributing to this inferiority complex."

"Mmmm". Her nodding even more drastic. As if she'd made the discovery herself. Always with the 'active listening'. It drove Dell mad.

"Perhaps I start by forgiving my brother for being born better. It was out of his control after all. Maybe *that's* the first step in getting this pathetic knob of skin to work for me again."

She'd make a sad clown face and tilt her head in question.

"Sure." Dell would say. "That's no way to convince him to come back to work."

She'd close her eyes and shake her head vigorously.

Dell would look down as if to apologize to his member. Surely not the biggest or most efficient laborer on the assembly line of lovers his girlfriend had had but most likely not the worst. But never mind the rest of the union, this cog was on strike. Therapy was his last ditch effort for a chance at a decent hard on.

"Maybe I should forgive these stubborn parts of myself too?"

"Ahhhh ha!" A big pantomime smile bulging with prudent entitlement.

Sometimes Dell wanted to shout at her, "If you stopped moving and just listened, maybe you could tell me something! Hell, what am I paying you for? This Ikea sofa with shitty lumbar support and your Salt Rock ambience?" To this he could imagine her releasing a gratuitous sigh, mouthing, "Valid."

Of course he would not unleash this rage upon her. But he was growing worrisome of the new thorns of ire developing from these sessions. "Perhaps I should talk to a professional about this?", he would think.

But today was different. Finally, a breakthrough. Today she just sat there still as can be and listened. He began to purge with wild abandon. He was barely stopping for breath, so invigorated by her lack of zeal. By the end, he had cleansed his spirit of years worth of blockages, attributed dozens of social deficiencies to his parents and forgave them for each in the same hot breath. He even recalled a time when his brother intentionally missed the winning pass for the opposing team in the intramural football final so that he could taste sweet victory for once... albeit from the bench, sweet. He was becoming so enthralled by all this self diagnosis that he even started to feel a tightness in the left side of his Levis around his groin. All the while she just sat there, seemingly paralyzed by his rapture.

"I can't say how much I appreciate your..."

"Help." She said weakly.

“Yes! Wow, I gotta say we are really on the same page today.”

She just stared at him. Her blankness was exquisite.

“And look at that, our hour is up. Wow, doctor, thank you. You know, I’m leaving for Big Bear for a little getaway, a week ‘*off the grid*’ as the say, and I have to admit, I was going to play hooky from next week’s appointment. But now... Yikes, I’m afraid we may be stuck with each other for good!”

She remained still. Gosh, Dell thought, she was really committed to this new approach. She even looked genuinely sad. As if he had just transferred all of his baggage and pressures of his past directly onto her. Had he helped her find a new brand of empathy unmarred by affect? He couldn’t believe his eyes but a tear slowly streamed down her cheek. In the trickery of the dim glow of her Salt Rock lamp the tear even looked red like some dramatic display of the stigmata. What deep crevices of her psyche had he illuminated? He looked away so as not to embarrass her and gathered his keys.

“Well, ok then. Again, thank you. Same time, same place next week? I’ll be here if you will!”

One week later, at the same time and same place, Dell returned. He walked up to the receptionist with a salt licked smile.

“Is she ready for me?”

The receptionist said nothing and began to tear up. Two men came through the door of the hallway and flashed badges.

“Dell Becker?”

“Yes.”

"Have a seat!"

“Sure.”

“We are going to have to ask you a few questions.”

Then the receptionist yelled out, “Her whole face! It was just blood! All blood! How could you leave her like that!”

The detectives explained to Dell that his therapist had suffered an aneurism one week ago. The autopsy put the timing of the fatal swelling smack dab in the middle of his session. Being Dell was her last appointment of the day, she sat like that till the next morning until her unlucky receptionist found her.

“She bled out through her eyes, ears and nose. It looked like a God damn horror film.” The detective aimed this at Dell as though he was somehow at fault. His partner uncrossed his legs and recrossed them the other way to validate the detective’s remark. “So tell us, why is it you’ve been MIA since the incident?”

“Well, it’s simple. I left from my appointment here last week to pick up my girlfriend for our October trip to Big Bear. To be honest, we would have stayed through the week but I didn’t want to miss my appointment.”

“Must have really needed a week ‘off the grid’... as they say.”

“You know I was thinking about it and well, *do* they still? Can one really be ‘*off the grid*’... *as they say*. I mean cell service was pretty great up there. Even close to the coast it was clear as...”

“Convenient timing, Mr. Becker.” The detective said solemnly. His partner added nothing but listened

obnoxiously, raising his eyebrows and shoulders like they were attached to some overzealous puppet master.

“And you didn’t notice anything strange about your doctor in last week’s session?”

“Well she was awfully bearable.”

“I beg your pardon, son?”

“Sorry. No, nothing drastic. I suppose I was more focused on myself.”

“Well it doesn’t take a dead therapist to tell you how narcissistic that is.” His partner nearly lost his eyebrows altogether.

“Well, I mean... it is *my* therapy?”

“You know what MY spelled backwards is, Dell?”

“Uhh...”

“Y Me”, he said in a crybaby voice while his partner played a sad mime.

“Well, not really.”

“Why me? Why now? Why-ning! Wine, wine, wine. That’s all your generation does.”

“Hey, this is supposed to be a safe space.” Dell parried.

“Should we go into the office and have you *wine* us to death too?”

Dell gasped and tried to reply as calmly as possible, “I... I feel attacked.”

His partner was ecstatic. He sneered at Dell with rosy cheeks and bulging eyes as if he was having an aneurism. The detective’s hardball was unrelenting.

“Well tell that to the Carrie look-alike that used to be your doctor.”

“Jesus, Officer...”

“Detective.”

“Jesus, Detective, do you have any idea how much therapy it can take to release an image like that from our...”

“Cut the shit, Sigmund. Now tell us in as much detail as you possibly can about last week’s appointment. And remember, your freedom depends on it.”

“Sure.”

And Dell divulged. Every trauma coupled with every suture. Into every crack was again shone a light leaving only honeysuckle forgiveness to fill the chasms of his past. By the end, catharsis was growing in Dell’s crotch again and both detectives sat still. Both wore the expression of weary travelers at the end of a long road together. Sad for it to come to an end but altogether aware they were better for it. Even the puppet sat calm. Dell smiled at him. He returned a meek smile, one not ready for pleasantries. Then a small stream of blood began to run from his nose.

“Oh Jesus Christ, Ron. Get yourself a tissue and some fresh air, will ya. We are done here anyways.”

Ron scurried to a box of Kleenex that sat on the receptionist's counter.

"Hand me one too, will ya? My allergies seem to be... oh, just hand me a couple, will ya!"

The detective blew his nose into the tissue and muttered something about the season. Ron walked outside with his hand plugging his nose and his head tilted back.

"Poor shmuck gets a nose bleed anytime he gets emotional."

"Really? Sounds like a physical manifestation of some emotional blockage."

"Sounds like he should come to you for advice, eh kid."

"Oh I think those matters require a professional." Dell said.

"What like a shrink? Hey, I didn't say he was crazy." The detective caught himself and for the first time looked apologetic to Dell's situation. "Well, no offense."

"Sure."

That night Dell's girlfriend was in the mood. Something about tragedy turned her on and since he was able to relive his breakthrough session, he was firm as an Ikea futon. In mid-romp, his mind wandered and he found himself full of gratitude for his late therapist. Regardless of how or to what effect it inevitably had on *her*, their session had cured him.

Dell's girlfriend steam rolled him to his back reminding him of the task at hand. She rode him wildly. Her head nodding back and forth. Her eyebrows and mouth lifting and dropping. Her shoulders bouncing up and down like some epileptic marionette. Then all of her movement shifted and focused below her naval and her head and shoulders became absolutely still. Her hips twitched in tiny violent jolts. As she finally came, Dell watched her expression grow blank and almost sad. Perhaps she hadn't realized how much she missed this 'release'. Then Dell saw a single tear drip from her eye and slowly down her cheek. Perhaps it was better than she ever remembered. Then another tear. In the dim light of the tv glow, it looked red. And then she just sat there still.

After a moment, Dell broke the silence.

"Baby?"

She looked down at him as if surprised he was there. She wiped away the dark tear from her cheek and very blankly asked him, "Are you ready to come?"

"Sure."

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