SCHOPENHAUER'S PORCUPINES

Intimacy and Its Dilemmas

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FIVE STORIES OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

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4 A DARWINIAN FINCH

What a trifling difference must often determine which shall survive and which perish!
—Charles Darwin, letter to Asa Gray

FOR MONTHS the professor had awakened to the same vague misery at four o'clock each morning—too early to rise, too late for a sleeping pill. There was nothing to do at that rude hour but cry, or stave off tears with ruminations: about her job, her life, archaic words for pain. Old English, she told me, had a special word—*uhtceara*—for the sadness or grief one feels in the hour before dawn.

Professor Pearl Quincey scheduled and then canceled several appointments with me. Each time we talked, she was "too fiendishly busy" or "too fiercely independent" for therapy. Each time, I learned a bit more of her story.

She was born in a shantytown in Jamaica and emigrated to the United States with her family as a young child. At fourteen, Pearl returned to the island to live with a schoolteacher aunt. A stellar student, she imagined herself teaching high school one day in Jamaica or in the American South. At a state college, Pearl's brilliance caught the attention of professors who urged her to aim higher. She had the potential to become a scholar, teach in a university, shine a light for other young people.

After an exhausting twelve years in graduate school—she was working to support her family back home at the same time—Pearl landed a position in an English department of no small reputation. The job offer, she said, was her life's proudest moment—and her family's as well. The little girl born in a hand-built house without hot water, the girl who'd been spat on by the children of her white teachers, was now an assistant professor of literature.

One year into her new life, however, it was clear something had gone terribly wrong. In the august university environment that appeared to offer everything, Pearl felt less stimulated, more isolated and depleted than ever before. Not even the death of her epileptic sister had left her feeling so hollowed out. Neither the strain of living with an overbearing stepfather nor the pain of watching a brother go to jail—nothing had quite prepared her for the loneliness of life in elite academia.

Where Pearl had imagined a convivial group of scholars devoted to students and involved with the community, she found small-minded cynics fighting over office space. Students complained of never having spoken to a professor. And as the only woman of color in the department, Pearl felt everyone taking her measure. Secretaries looked right through her; security guards followed her around the bookstore.

What was she doing in this wretched place? The answer: trying her best to get tenure—a job for life. The irony was not lost on her.

"Apparently I want the chance to become permanently—not just provisionally—miserable."

Pearl vowed to remain philosophical as her tenure vote came up. If she lost her first bid, no matter. She had been jumping through hoops for years; she would just keep jumping.

On the day the department actually voted her down, however, Pearl was devastated. Leaving the house the next morning,

she drove the wrong way down a one-way street and stopped nose-to-nose with an eighteen-wheel truck, its horns blaring. The following day, she was awakened by a fierce attack of sciatica. The pain was so disabling she could barely get to the bathroom.

Ultimately, a sense of being robbed of her body, of being split into pieces, of actually not wanting to go on, became more frightening than the idea of seeking help. Pearl resolved to see me as soon as she could drive again.

I was pleased finally to meet her.

Pearl Quincey was a tall woman—six feet, perhaps—dressed in an aquamarine shift with a headwrap to match. Her skin was the color of English toffee, her voice a sturdy roux of West Indian and American inflections.

"I have shipwrecked," she said, accenting the second syllable. "I have washed up on your shore after all. Please forgive my false alarms."

I offered whatever combination of chairs and footrests might make her comfortable.

"I'm fine, actually, as long as I don't breathe."

Sitting across from Pearl, I myself had the sensation of holding my breath. This served as a first clue to my countertransference. I was identifying with her, mirroring her tight posture. On the surface, Pearl was an unlikely double for me, a medium-sized midwesterner. Nonetheless, I felt kinship. I have never fought a tenure battle, but I had beaten my head against enough institutional walls to imagine her weariness. My parents had not faced the indignities of racism or immigration, but they spent their lives doing hard physical labor, and like Pearl, I was the first in my family to get a formal education. Finally, like Pearl, I once overvalued self-reliance and shrank from the thought of confiding in strangers. Matching my breathing to

hers alerted me to these runnels of thought. Empathy has its place in psychotherapy, but overidentification spells trouble, for each patient must be known on her own terms.

Professor Quincey leaned forward on the palms of her hands and said that the great frustration of the moment was not being able to read the titles on my bookshelves. No sooner had she made us smile than she began a full-bodied sob. Pearl was terribly ashamed of feeling bad. I asked why.

"I come from a line of strong women, and I have never broken down. I can't recognize myself in the fragile mess you see before you. And to fall apart over such petty stuff. It's mortifying. Have you ever known *anyone* this unraveled over *tenure?*"

Mentally, I composed a short list.

The "publish or perish" system and the factionalism of the academy unnerve many tenure candidates. Even that entitled white man Henry Kissinger claimed he left academic life because he "couldn't stand the politics."

The English department acknowledged Pearl's fine teaching and writing. However, they wanted to see more writing and less fine teaching. The idea of shortchanging students in order to crank out publications offended Pearl. But to leave the university—and disappoint her family, supporters, and students—was unthinkable.

When I suggested that we explore her hopes and misgivings about coming to see me, Pearl said:

"My mother is my closest confidante. In therapy, one delves into the family to pick it apart, and that would not be helpful to me. I need you to help me with the present, not the past."

I nodded. Because Pearl had mentioned isolation and loneliness, I asked about the people she counted on for support in the present. Did she have a spouse or partner? *No.* Children? *No way.* Pearl said she could see where my questions were headed, and

she decided to help me out. She had never been married or partnered, she said, and she did not see romance on the horizon.

"I don't date," said Pearl. "I've decided I'm not dateable."

"Not dateable?"

"I am a Darwinian finch," she said, shifting her long limbs to the other side of the footrest. "Do you, by any chance, remember reading about the finches in *The Origin of Species?*"

"The ones who gave Darwin the idea of natural selection?"

"Exactly. Well, I am like a finch that has flown its little niche for a new one. I've adapted in certain ways but I am, nonetheless, slightly different from the other birds, and now none can recognize me as a potential mate."

I was surprised that this lovely, accomplished, thirty-four-year-old woman had never had a serious relationship.

As for Darwin's finches, I had read about them in college—who hadn't?—but I couldn't bring to mind the details of their mating patterns. Pearl was using finch problems as a metaphor for the problems of human beings who leave one social niche for another. She felt different, unrecognizable in her current environment. I wanted to know more about her migrations, more about her original niche as well, but she had warned me off with "That would not be helpful. . . ."

I have spoken before about the "yes" and the "no" alive in every person who seeks therapy. Listening to Pearl I heard the following: Yes, I would like to confide in you. No, that would displace my loyal family. Yes, I want to get help. No, that would prove I needed it. Yes, I want to change my life. No, I don't. All the things I do and everything I am have taken me this far.

"Don't get me wrong," said Pearl. "I'm not *unlovable.* I have wonderful friends at home and in Jamaica."

"Would I be right in assuming that you're the person on whom everyone depends for strength?"

Yes, she said. Her childhood nickname was "little Mama." Even her professors looked to her for wisdom, it seemed. Her brothers and sister had straightened out over the years, but their jobs were minimum wage. When her nephews' Catholic school bills came, when her mother needed a new roof, Pearl was called. That was another reason she could not give up her current job. The salary allowed her to help them.

I asked Pearl what she did to take care of herself when she was feeling bad. The answer: She organized a conference, taught Sunday school, or practiced calligraphy. Her list of a year's activities exceeded what most people take on in five. The term going through my head was one coined by the British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein: *the manic defense.* It refers to the flurry of activity some people use to mask even serious depression. It can work for years, and often is interrupted only by illness, exhaustion, or an accident. It occurred to me even as we spoke that this recent round of catastrophes might be the best thing that could happen to Pearl. Perhaps only this failure of an overdeveloped sense of duty would bring balance.

Shifting again on the couch, Pearl squeezed her back with both hands and asked if there were some way to think about psychotherapy that wasn't so "self-indulgent."

Perhaps because she had described herself as a finch, the idea of flying came to mind. When traveling by air, I reminded her, flight attendants advise adults to don their own oxygen masks before helping others. The moment I said it, I regretted the triteness of the analogy, but Pearl didn't seem to mind.

"You're talking about necessary selfishness, about first things first. OK. But how do you see the goals of this work?"

She imagined I would always be on the side of individual happiness, and not that of any larger purpose. There were days, she said, when she felt exactly the same way.

"Yesterday I considered telling the chairman that I would simply prefer not to get tenure, and I would just go home and teach third grade, or raise chickens and pigs."

"That's how you're feeling now? That you'd like to leave this whole mess behind?"

At this, Pearl started to cry into her fists, and at some length replied:

"No. Today, I want to say to you, 'I want tenure. Please help me keep my job.'"

Pearl had assumed my hopes for her would lie in a certain direction. I was glad she was able to articulate this assumption. Every practitioner must resist the temptation to steer the patient's course. Certainly it would give me pleasure to help Pearl break the glass ceiling, but who could say that that should be the goal of our work? Pearl herself vacillated from day to day about staying or leaving. My response was that our work could help her to clarify and implement her desire. That seemed to sit well with her.

In the meantime, what was her intention? To interview other therapists? To come back? She would come back, she said. The books, the feeling in the room, made her sense that good things had happened here. She made an appointment for the following week.

Pearl had positioned me in opposition to her family, at least to some degree. In her mind, I wanted to "pick apart" her family, and she was not about to do that. As for my identification with her, perhaps it was a way of bypassing our differences. There was, after all, no real comparison in our social origins. Maybe my inclination to merge our experiences reflected something about Pearl's relationship with her mother, her "closest confidante." All I knew about their relationship were the few things she had said in passing: They spoke on the phone each day, and both suffered from chronic back pain.

Uppermost for me was the matter of Pearl's engaging her dependency needs. In the past few decades, feminists have pointed out how difficult it can be for women, especially those who have taken on parental roles as children, to be helped instead of helping. A longing for succor can be masked in a hundred ways. I hoped Pearl would someday be able to lean on others, starting with me.

Finally, I was intrigued by her calling herself a "Darwinian finch." She had changed her name from a precious gem to a lonely bird, from the nickname "little Mama" to the name of a creature who would not mate. I turned to the bookcase to scan *The Origin of Species* before my next patient arrived. There, in between Darwin's *The Descent of Man* and Dickens' *Bleak House*, I found a telltale gap. A borrower had failed to return the book. I could not remember who it was, but I was fighting mad at the miscreant.

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Pearl showed up for her next appointment saying she had had two nights of restful sleep. She felt and indeed looked somewhat better. She could move her head freely, and had a fuller view of my consulting room and the books. I asked if anything caught her eye.

"There is a lot of psychoanalysis, of course. And feminism. . . . Hey now! You have good taste!"

"I do?"

"*Annie John!* Now there is a book a woman wants to see on her analyst's bookshelf."

We smiled at each other complicitly. I, too, loved Jamaica Kincaid's novel about a girl growing up in Antigua. So long did Pearl's gaze linger on that slender volume that I asked to hear her thoughts.

"The book is about—but you know the book is about a mother-daughter relationship. The sentence coming to my mind is so peripheral, I feel almost silly. . . . "

It was a good moment to introduce the "fundamental rule" of psychoanalysis: Say whatever comes to mind, no matter how important or irrelevant it may appear, no matter how pleasurable or unpleasurable.

In the passage she recalled, Annie John, age nine, is asked to read aloud in class. The sentence was: "The sound of my own voice had always been a calming potion to me."

I had only to smile.

"Heavenly stars, of course it's relevant! It's about talking, about the relief of speaking in front of the other, of being heard. I did feel better after our last meeting. I was surprised."

Jamaica Kincaid writes about the trauma of a daughter gaining independence from a mother and father in a normal family, a loving family. Little Annie gets up to read an original composition to the teacher. The composition describes the day a child is separated from her mother at the beach. She panics, and when they are reunited, the mother says, "I will never leave you." The teacher praises the story and adds it to the collection in the school library.

I knew that Pearl had left her mother at one point to live with her aunt. I was curious about that move and what it had meant to all involved. Had the transition been fluid, relatively free of conflict, motivated solely by the aunt's ability to provide better schooling? What role had Pearl's stepfather played? Had there been jealous tension among the adults, or furious rivalry among the siblings? How many kids were in this family, anyway?

Once again, I invited Pearl to talk. She could start anywhere.

"Well, in the English department. . . . "

Pearl resumed her tales of work, describing a radio program she had done with four other faculty members. The moderator had referred to the participants as Dr. Collins, Dr. Riley, Dr. Rossi, Dr. Levine, and *Pearl.* Absurdly, the topic of the program involved race and gender in academia.

"I felt anger beating drums in my ears each time someone called me by my first name. A part of me knew better than to call attention to it, but midway I heard myself saying aloud: 'Just a minute! Why are the others being called by their title, while I am "Pearl"?'"

"What happened?"

"The bemused host vowed to begin calling me 'Professor,' whereupon the four men sniffed—*almost* in unison: 'Personally, I'm not hung up on titles. Go ahead, and call me *John, George, Sneezy, Grumpy.*' Do you think I'm crazy to care about this? It's 1990, for the love of God!"

"Do I think *you're* crazy?"

Pearl didn't pause to hear supportive words from me. She had two other stories to tell. As I listened, I was aware of being enraged on her behalf and wanting to defend her. In fantasy, I landed on the scene, demanding to know why her colleagues did not understand that forgoing recognition of status was a luxury of the recognized.

Pearl was as much storyteller as analysand at that moment in the treatment. Any attempt on my part to intervene she gently deflected. Winnicott would say that she experienced my efforts as *impingements*, referring to the kind of parental attention that is felt by the child as usurping her nascent self. Years later Pearl would say to me, "I have been thinking about how few people in history have been listened to." Pearl needed me to listen.

A few weeks later, Pearl raised a complaint about the English department's self-described feminists. She saw them as

posers, "purveyors of fried air." Nothing was "subversive" enough for them.

"In the meantime, these sisters wouldn't know a political thought if it stood up in their soup."

Valid as her critique might be, I had to wonder about its meaning in the transference. Although Pearl was cooperative in therapy, I felt that she was distant, still wary of me. Was it easier to critique the white feminists in her department than the white feminist sitting across from her in the room?

Pearl insisted that I was completely different from those women.

"No comparison," she assured me. "Apples and oranges. Chalk and cheese."

I was, she said, more like the women in her family.

"Really?"

I asked Pearl to explain and she said she would, but she was keen to tell me something else first. A program she had organized for Black History Month had been written up in the local newspaper. There was a department meeting on the day it appeared, and Pearl was sure that the chair would mention it. But no one said a word.

Pearl had decided not to get angry in those meetings any more. She was determined to be equable and patient in her dealings with colleagues. Nothing really worked, however.

Regardless of the tack Pearl took, those meetings had this in common: They left her feeling invisible, mocked, sometimes sick with self-criticism for days. I had to quiz her to find out that occasionally she did get compliments from colleagues. Those affirmations she managed to dismiss as disingenuous. For Pearl there were only two kinds of feedback: bad and insincere. As I listened to her, I began to hear the longing beneath her anger and frustration. It was fine, I said, to use

therapy to consider and reconsider strategy, and to vent her rage. It was also important to address the longing for recognition. Pearl was less than smitten with this notion.

"Not because you're wrong, but because I don't fancy the idea of needing validation from others. Remember, I'm usually the one who ladles it out."

Precisely.

A vast amount of modern psychoanalytic theory deals with our desire for recognition from other human beings. Since Freud, no issue has so dominated the conversation about psychoanalytic theory or practice. Self psychologists, following Heinz Kohut, write about the "mirror hungry" personality. Students of Winnicott define the "good-enough mother" largely in terms of her ability to *recognize* her infant. That means seeing the child as a separate being, not simply an extension of herself. Followers of Jacques Lacan believe that the ego is developed in the "mirror phase," which begins around eighteen months of age. Lacanians emphasize the trouble caused by a lifetime of searching for ourselves in a place external to us (either the physical mirror or the approving gaze of others). No one else can tell us who we "really are." Even the physical object we call a mirror deceives by reversing right and left.

Feminist analysts have pointed out the politics of mirroring, following Virginia Woolf, who famously remarked on women's "delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size."

We spend our energies figuring out whose recognition counts—which mirror to consult and how to read the images we discover. Some people are drawn to trick mirrors. They will check their reflection only in the gaze of someone guaranteed to diminish them. In contrast, a few lucky souls walk right by mirrors that elongate flaws and foreshorten virtues.

Being the only woman or the only member of a racial minority at the workplace can make it much more difficult to be recognized and to believe in the recognition one finds. Minority status doesn't create the psychological need for recognition, it complicates it.

Early experience is influential if not determinative of our ability to see and be seen by others. Those who have not been recognized by parents don't know what recognition means, don't know quite how to seek it—and may be confused when it comes their way. I was, of course, interested in Pearl's experiences in her family. She let me know she had experienced "zero" recognition from her stepfather, but that she had been "loved and adored" by her mother and "deeply understood" by her aunt. We agreed that she needed to learn to accept recognition from people outside the family and particularly, it seemed, from male colleagues. I believed, moreover, that there were aspects of Pearl—her sexuality and desirability, for example—that had yet to be reflected convincingly by anyone.

It was in this session that I asked Pearl if she felt recognized by me.

"I do. To a surprising degree."

Would she let me know if I got her wrong?

That would be difficult, she admitted, but she would try to be candid.

In the meantime, Pearl needed to get back to work. There were no guarantees when it came to tenure, but the advice coming her way was to write. Pearl had plenty of ideas, but she was so anxious that the words would not come. She sat at her desk, night after nauseous night, still afraid of falling under the wheels of her depression, of getting caught in its gears. Pearl found herself counting the days between our weekly sessions.

"I'm a little annoyed," she said. "This is what I was afraid of. Therapy creates dependency."

I told her she was right, but that the dependency is of a particular kind—a temporary one. She was free to lean on our relationship as long as she needed it, but our goal was to set a date at some point to say good-bye. I asked what she was thinking.

"I don't know about the good-bye part, but the rest is comforting. You can be almost as comforting as my mother. I used to say my mother would have made a great lawyer, but now I think she should have been a therapist. I mailed her a photo of me taken at the department party, and she said the chairman looked like 'a snake in a suit.' When I told her the latest thing he had said to me, she just paused and said, 'Pearl Quincey, why are you so bothered by this heartless nonsense?' I wanted to crawl up in her lap, all six feet of me."

Comparing me with her mother was surely a compliment, although I could not compete with that lap!

"My mother would get these big knots in her shoulders and neck from scrubbing and lifting, so I would knead her back and then sit in her lap and rub her wrists."

They had been comforting each other for a long time.

Pearl was reminded once again of Jamaica Kincaid's novel: "Annie John loves her mother's embrace, and says, '*It was in such a paradise that I lived.*' Well, that was me, too. That was us."

I asked Pearl if she wanted to elaborate, and it was at that point, three months into our work, that she began to describe the love story between her mother and her. It did not end when she moved in with her aunt. The two women in her life presented strong arms that reached the thousand miles from northern Florida to Kingston, the island's capital.

"I have traveled a fair amount, and although my mother claims to be interested in traveling, I can't get her to leave home. She has always said, 'I would rather see the world through your eyes.'"

"You have brought the world to your mother."

"When you put it like that, I understand why I'm so tired!"

Pearl felt that it was the least she could do, however. There was no one on earth she admired more.

"My mother has been my hero since I heard her talk back to the sheriff who came for my brother. Before that, even. She has been my hero since Haley's Department Store."

I asked if she would let me in on those episodes from childhood.

"Haley's was the famous Easter hat crisis. My mother made all our clothes, you see, and not many of those after my stepfather lost his job. Then he worked again for a while, and to make a long story short, we were visiting the city and allowed to buy Easter hats. I am in the fifth grade. Can you imagine what the inside of a department store looks like to me? I am on Cloud Nine looking at the pink and yellow chiffon flowers, thinking this work of art is going to be mine! But in twenty minutes it becomes clear that the clerks are not waiting on us. My mother tries nicely to get their attention, but there we stand while they wait on every white woman and girl in the world. Finally, a woman with hair that looks stiff like a lampshade turns to us. When mother points to the two pink hats, the woman balls up some greasy old tissue and puts it in the lining of the hats. Why? So our hair won't touch the white folks' merchandise! Tell me, what is the thing to do in that situation! My mother tries the hat on, but slowly, making everyone wait. And then, when the lady says, 'Make up your mind, poky, or get along!' she says, looking into the mirror the whole time: 'Madame, can't you see I have made up my mind? I have made up my mind to be treated like everyone else at this counter.' I was so proud of her!"

I could see little Pearl, nervous but thrilled to know "*this is my mother!*"

"Oh, Deborah, how we laughed about that woman! If you could have seen her face! The thing about Rita Quincey is that she's not bitter. To this day, she'll say: 'Those were the *times* we was living in.' When I tell her things that go on now at the college—that's what she can't understand. 'Educated folks with bad manners?' She can't quite fathom it."

Pearl adored her mother, and who wouldn't adore a mother like that? I could almost hear them talking on the phone at night in low tones, mocking the English department oddballs, giggling.

"I was twenty-one when my stepfather died, and my mother seemed to come alive in some ways—we all did. And yet she is still down there cleaning houses, won't travel. . . ."

Pearl interrupted her own shambling narrative to say I would be disappointed if I were looking for family scandals or abuse.

I said I wasn't looking for scandals; I simply wanted to know more about her early world. Now that she had clued me in a bit, how did she feel?

Pearl did not want her family "pathologized." She had heard social workers speak disparagingly about black families without any sensitivity to the strength of black families. There was nothing strange or unhealthy about her having lived with her aunt, she said. At times she had called them both "Mom," but that did not mean she was confused about who her mother was.

Pearl asked point-blank if I could see why she considered her mother her best friend. I could. She sounded irresistible.

Pearl waved her long amber beads playfully in my direction. She was glad I was getting the picture. She had been afraid, she said, that I would want to take her mother away from her.

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Two weeks later Pearl remarked that while I knew a lot about her, she knew nothing about me. When I asked what she might like to know, her answer came back quickly. It was actually a relief, she said, not to know about my life, for if she did, she might worry and want to take care of me. Still, she was curious. . . .

Pearl's thinking is typical of psychotherapy patients. We feel curious about the therapist's life, but we don't really want our questions answered. I suggested that Pearl make a habit of stating her questions about me with the understanding that the questions need not be answered. The patient's fantasies are always more instructive than the facts.

Pearl saw me as someone who had undergone some great difficulty in life. And she guessed I had been widowed or divorced.

In the transference, I was becoming the good, slightly idealized mother. Like her mother, I was single and hardworking (Pearl was concerned about my long hours) and self-sacrificing (she guessed I did not take dinner breaks).

One evening when I happened to be thinking about her, Pearl telephoned. Very apologetically, she asked to run a work problem by me. Within ten minutes, she had outlined and solved her own problem, and I had only to listen and marvel at the fact that she had allowed herself the "indulgence" of calling. She said that if I hadn't picked up on the first ring, she might have lost her nerve. "You answered the phone because you knew I needed you tonight."

During this long moment in our work, Pearl Quincey could make me feel preternaturally attuned, effortlessly healing. Even when I did something that might have annoyed her, such as being late or saying "See you Tuesday" instead of Monday, she turned my foible to virtue. "You're just showing me that you, too, are human."

It was in such a paradise that we lived.

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Pearl came in one afternoon several weeks later, talking about a good class. A male student had spouted off about the women's movement, insisting that there was nothing in nature more powerful than the maternal instinct, and the students had engaged each other in high-volume debate. During the next class, Pearl made a single and effective intervention: She read a passage from Darwin about instincts in animals that are more powerful than the maternal. The students buzzed in amazement. Pearl said that teaching had become a pleasure again now that she was feeling better.

I was distracted by this second reference to Charles Darwin.

"Pearl! Darwin again!"

"Again? Yes, the finches!"

Had I done my best to hunt those finches down? Finding that all four copies of *The Origin of Species* were checked out of the library, I had requested a "recall" but never followed up. I asked Pearl if she would refresh my memory about the finches and explain what they meant to her.

"Absolutely!" she said, and made a note to bring me the reference. At the moment, however, she had more pressing items for the session: a plan to get the tenure writing done, and a dream about writing with peacock-blue ink.

Pearl's view of dreams was different from mine. Whereas in the Freudian tradition I begin with the idea that the dream is a fulfillment of a wish, Pearl believed dreams had predictive power. The peacock-blue dream pleased her as it meant she would soon be "proud as a peacock" about her work.

"And why a *peacock?*"

"Why not?" she laughed.

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The summer was approaching and Pearl had let me know early on that she would be interrupting therapy to spend time with her family in Florida. She had spent every summer of her life there and felt, indeed, that she belonged with the people who loved her most.

Pearl went a step farther than I expected. She said she was feeling so well that she was ready to stop therapy. She would come back in the fall to tie up loose ends, but she was grateful and pleased to be done. "I am feeling so much steadier. I feel like telling all my students that they should undergo psychotherapy."

I did my best to smile through this little speech, but I was nonplussed. Did she really feel she had "undergone psychotherapy"? I still knew relatively little of her history. Some patients offer more background information in two sessions than Pearl had in four months. And what about this business about being a finch, doomed to celibacy? Pearl had expressed candidly her fear of dependency, of course, and I had insisted on my intention to let her go. Now I felt like a Band-Aid she was peeling off. I suspected that she was detaching precisely because she was feeling close to me. I suggested that she might be talking of stopping therapy to avoid missing me over the summer. The notion did not ring true to her.

I asked if she didn't feel there were many more things for us to explore in therapy.

"Friends have nagged me for years about 'exploring' men. They cut out personal ads, tell me about dating services, leave their kids with me to babysit. Meanwhile, my mother is more forward-thinking than these big-city girls."

Rita Quincey had told her daughter long ago that women no longer needed to marry. Rita described a television show she had seen about the Delaney sisters, who credited their hundred and four–plus years to the fact that they never married. "We didn't have husbands driving us crazy," they had told reporters.

I asked Pearl if she thought my wanting to explore her personal life was a step toward marrying her off.

"Well, I don't know what you have in mind, and that's the point. Who decides when a person is healthy?"

Regarding the goals of therapy, Freud said simply: *lieben und arbeiten*, to love and to work. Wisely, he did not define either term. Others have not hesitated to do so, some with disastrous results. Melanie Klein wrote a paper on the requirements for the termination of analysis. Before adding her own contribution, Klein summarized what she considered to be the accepted and "well-known criteria" for termination, including "an established potency and heterosexuality." Given all he did to normalize homosexuality, this is not a criterion Freud would have accepted or recognized. Reading the case studies of certain British and American practitioners, one could easily get the impression that their goal was to help people adapt to middle-class social codes.

I had already devoted a good portion of my career to contesting this normative revision of Freud. It felt odd to be identified with the conservative view!

I find nothing suspect about a woman's choosing to live without marriage or children, but Pearl seemed not to have

done any choosing. She had expressed neither conflict nor curiosity about romance or sex. I stated the obvious: There is no single definition of the good life. However, I argued, in this psychotherapy which she had elected to undergo, she had introduced an enigmatic statement about her identity. I suggested that before finishing our work, we get to know more about Pearl as "Darwinian finch."

She agreed.

I was pleased at Pearl's willingness to challenge me in this session and to let me push back. It showed her ability to move out of the idyllic mother-daughter harmony into something more complex. Perhaps it was just this complexity, this dissonance, that she dreaded, and she would rather leave therapy than face it.

The months that followed provided me with space to reflect on my Darwinian finch. Pearl had said there was something about her that was "slightly different," resulting in her not being recognized by men as desirable. I knew that she did not mean anything obvious like her height, which might have intimidated boys in school. Pearl had let me know she was talking about very subtle, "hardly visible" differences. The only other clue she had offered in passing was that academic men felt she was not quite like other academic women, and that men in her hometown found her "citified" and "strange."

Allowing for the complications caused by class migration, I couldn't readily account for the extreme nature of Pearl's situation. Why had she not found a single man in one of those places who would love her precisely for her differences, who would find her not odd but extraordinary?

Given the enormous number of girls who have suffered sexual trauma in their early lives, I had to wonder if she had been molested. Many abused girls say just that: that they feel

fundamentally "different" in some vague and painful way. Pearl had warned me early on not to expect surprises or secrets. We know, however, that many people repress traumatic events and remember them later, sometimes with corroborating evidence from the abusers or from hospital records.

I wondered also if the "unrecognizability" in question had to do with sexual orientation. Was it possible that her desire was for women, but that this had been less acceptable to her than abstinence?

There was no evidence for my hypotheses either in the content of her sessions or in the transference. Some people who have been abused are so imbued with the victim-victimizer dynamic that they continue unconsciously to re-create it everywhere. Sitting with Pearl, I never felt, "This woman is expecting to be abused by me." Nor did I feel the opposite (also common): "This person is expecting me to submit to her emotional abuse."

Before leaving on vacation, I finally put my hands on a copy of *The Origin of Species* in order to read the chapter on finches. To my everlasting surprise, there was no such chapter! Not only that, but the book indexed not a single entry for finches. I decided it had to be a bad index, and began reading the text from the beginning. Pigeons, mockingbirds, and tortoises inhabited those pages that changed the world, but no finches. Perhaps Darwin described them in *The Descent of Man*, his book that explores natural selection in depth. Not a mention. Finally I found a single paragraph about the Galapagos finches in *Diary of the Voyage of the H.M.S. Beagle*—a book I had never read. That lesser work was written in 1837. Why had the finches not made it into his 1859 opus? And how had Pearl and I come to believe we had read a nonexistent passage? It was an extraordinary *folie à deux*, I thought, and yet something I could not discuss with my partner in illusion, precisely because she had flown home.

As the August air chilled to a fall breeze, I was pleased to see Pearl's name in my appointment book once again.

She walked into my office looking relaxed, sporting beaded plaits, and carrying a copy of *The Origin of Species.* Pearl said she had had a wonderful summer.

"But I have strange news for you. Someone stole a chapter out of this book," she said.

I knew what she meant.

"Well, I have some library work cut out for me," she said.

"Pearl, tell me what you remember about the finches."

She drew a deep breath, and finally embarked on her explanation. Pearl informed me that Charles Darwin had started off his voyage believing in the fixity of species. In the Galapagos Islands, however, he found thirteen distinct species of finches, one per island. He realized that their isolation from each other had allowed them to evolve into distinct species, not just varieties of the same species.

"But what does the story mean to you?"

"Some of those thirteen species look different from each other, but others are so much alike that the human eye can't distinguish them. Only the finches can. A bird who flies to a different area, despite sporting the same feathers and singing the same song, will be excluded on the basis of having a beak that is a hair's breadth different from the others."

"OK, so these birds, somehow—mysteriously to us—decide that a new bird on the block is just slightly different, and then deem that bird to be . . . "

"Undateable."

Pearl was more comfortable applying her intellect to the problem than moving close to her emotions. She had not spent much time thinking about why this particular story had resonated so deeply with her. She had, however, begun looking up

everything she could find on the topic. There was a good deal of helpful material, and Pearl made copies for me with passages highlighted in yellow.

The key to our conundrum lay in an article written by historian of science Frank Sulloway. Pearl flew in one afternoon, waving it in the air.

"This article is called 'Darwin and His Finches: The Evolution of a Legend.' Are you ready for this?"

She was hardly seated on the couch when she began reading aloud to me:

> [F]ar from being crucial to his evolutionary argument, as the legend would have us believe, the finches were not even mentioned in *The Origin of Species.* . . . In spite of the legend's manifest contradictions with historical fact, it successfully holds sway today in the major textbooks of biology and ornithology, and is frequently encountered in the historical literature on Darwin. It has become, in fact, one of the most widely circulated legends in the history of the life sciences, ranking with the famous stories of Newton and the apple. (p. 40)

Pearl looked up at me. I was still standing, too amazed to move. The moment I sat down and made eye contact, we both burst out laughing.

"No, wait—there's more!" she said.

Darwin apparently did notice the finches, but collected relatively few. Having packed them together, he had trouble labeling them. Observing the finches didn't turn him into an evolutionist. Rather, it was his conversion the following year to evolutionary views that allowed him to look differently at those finches. It was a colleague—a man who, ironically, didn't

believe in evolution—who had to tell him the finches were actually different species.

"So the legend romanticizes a messy bunch of events," I said, "removing the story of his dependence on other thinkers."

"Right. And apparently the serious work on the finches wasn't done until 1947, by a man named David Lack. It was he who observed that even the seemingly identical finches were careful not to interbreed."

Some scholars, we learned, believe they should be called "Lack's finches." The story does not end there, however. Evolution, as we now know, is not something that happened eons ago but something continuously operating. Later researchers found that under certain conditions, finches of different species do "date" and mate. Fully 10 percent of the finches on one of the Galapagos Islands are now hybrids. And the birds who have mated with those outside their group are the most robust of all!

Pearl was fascinated with the topic. The finch studies spoke to her like writing on the wall, and her excitement was contagious. Sketches of shiny black birds with impressive beaks, photocopies of data in infinite shades of gray, found a messy nest high on my old Ikea bookshelf.

The conclusion Pearl drew from her voluminous reading was that to be a Darwinian finch or a Lackian finch was by no means to be doomed to neglect and exclusion.

A source of ongoing dismay for Pearl was not being able to place the moment she had named herself a Darwinian finch. She remembered only writing a report in high school on Darwin, and finding him a sympathetic character—indeed, an intellectual hero.

This man whose ideas shook the world was a humble preacher who started out believing in the constancy of species. He allowed both observation and argument to change his mind. This was what a good scientist must do, she told her students. Or a good scholar.

Biographers have described Darwin as a homely man of mediocre intelligence, a bad speller, and an imperfect researcher who made terrible gaffes in sorting his specimens. He seemed to me an unlikely hero for Pearl, the elegant intellectual, meticulous in her work, possessed of a lapidary wit. Not odd at all, on second thought. One of the few things she had told me about her stepfather was that he had to be right all the time; there was no changing his mind. It occurred to me that Darwin had appeared at a moment in her young life as the flawed but gentle father for whom she longed.

Eventually, Pearl decided that regardless of where she had found the finch fable—updated with certain details—it stuck because she needed it to be true. "Mating" had for her an aura of impossibility, and it was more comfortable to think of this poetically as destiny rather than choice. What had become of beautiful Pearl, the woman trapped inside the story? Why not do some research on her own name?

On this subject of her name, Pearl had some things to tell me right then and there. Other facts she learned only later, after speaking with her mother.

She had always liked her first name, and remembered clearly the day her aunt showed her that precious pearls come in shades of black and white. And while she knew she had been named for her mother's mother, she had not known why.

"My mother had always told me that she didn't get along with her mother, who was crazy and beat her, but spared her sister, my aunt. My mother hoped that naming her pretty baby 'Pearl' would win her mother over."

Pearl had never liked her last name, "Quincey," because it belonged to the stepfather she despised. It might have been some

slave's first name, a hundred fifty years back, she said. She had simply never wanted to know anything about him or his family.

I let Pearl know that I believed in asking questions about our names. She agreed in principle, but made it clear that it might take years before she would be ready.

The name "Pearl Quincey" contained worlds of meaning: the attempt of a daughter (Rita) to win over a "crazy" mother, the story of that daughter's rivalry with her favored sister, an association with beautiful jewels in black and white, and a connection to slavery with all its savage destruction of names and subjectivities.

While speaking to her mother about names, Pearl had been careful not to mention therapy. It was important that Mrs. Quincey not have to think of Pearl as anything but invincible. She had been disappointed to learn that "after all the trouble and fuss" Pearl still did not have tenure.

"But they will raise your salary, no?" her mother asked.

Pearl admitted to me for the first time that she felt pressure from her mother to succeed. She also told me that she had felt bad about studying literature, as her mother had wanted her to become a famous scientist or doctor and discover a cure for cancer. Who could blame this mother, whose life had been crushingly difficult, for wanting to live through her child? Of course the family wanted Pearl to become a big name. Pearl wanted it, too.

The uncovering of the finch myth marked a turning point in our work. Pearl said: "It would make any person say, 'What else do I assume to be true that is not?' It feels like an open door where one expected none."

I wondered how she felt about the fact that I, too, had believed in the myth of Darwin's finches.

"You did and you didn't," she said. "You kept asking me to talk about it, or I never would have done the research."

My asking questions about her name is something I owe to my interest in the work of Jacques Lacan. No analyst since Freud has so keenly appreciated our debt as human beings to language, to the register of the symbolic. Even before we speak, we are spoken about, says Lacan. Before we are loved and held by mothers and others, before birth, and sometimes years before our conception, we have already been the subject of talk. In some families, a male or female child has been long awaited—or dreaded. In others, a child may be conceived as a replacement for a lost baby or relative. Parents rich and poor, sick and well, imagine all manner of things for their children. These expectations—along with cultural conversations about the value of children, male and female, born in and out of wedlock to parents young and old, straight and gay—cannot fail to affect children's subjectivity, the way they will say "I am." Sometimes all a person knows about this complex history of being spoken about is his or her name and namesake. Names, given to us in a deceptively simple gesture, are stuffed with hope, memory, and fear.

Investigating the "stuff" of our names and our origins can provoke anxiety, but failing to do so often ends up the more perilous choice. For an example of such peril, we need go no farther in myth or literature than Sophocles' Oedipus. The name "Oedipus" means "swollen foot" and refers to his biological father maiming him as an infant before having him abandoned in the woods. Oedipus is rescued by a herdsman and raised by adoptive parents. When, as an adult, Oedipus learns from the oracle that he will kill his father and marry his mother, he flees the adoptive parents, assuming the oracle meant them. Vainly trying to escape his fate, Oedipus of course fulfills it instead, killing his biological father and marrying his biological mother.

Oedipus showed exceptional cleverness in solving the riddle of the Sphinx. But he was neither clever nor curious enough to solve his own riddle, the riddle of his name. For Lacan, the Oedipus tale is not so much about the infamous family triangle as it is a case of mistaken identity. An aging Oedipus, blind and in exile, finally undertakes a kind of self-examination. Something we might call transformation or redemption comes as he acknowledges and accepts his wounded self. The formerly proud Oedipus addresses King Theseus poignantly at Colonus:

I come to give you something, and the gift
Is my own beaten self; no feast for the eyes;
Yet in me is a more lasting grace than beauty.

Jacques Lacan understood the Oedipus complex in the lives of actual men and women, analogously. We are, each one of us, embarked on a mission involving mistaken identity. In order to connect with other people—in order to answer our own "Who am I?"—we use names, academic degrees, medical diagnoses, family prognostications, and social myths. I am a "poor little rich kid," "the daughter of alcoholics," "the overachiever," "the forgotten middle child," "a Darwinian finch." Many of us never question these—cannot stop taking them for granted—until we falter, break down in some way.

Pearl had entered therapy thinking about herself more confidently as a Darwinian finch than as, say, "Professor Quincey." One could argue, of course, that "Professor Quincey" is also a mistaken identity. Alone, it does not carry the truth about Pearl. For Lacan, all identities are mistaken in the sense that they are superficial, partial. We use them to function in the world, but we need always to remember the cost. The point is not to go nameless, to refuse the question "Who am I?", but

to keep the conversation about identity going. This is the work of psychotherapy: to learn both to assume an identity and to call it into question. It is one of the principal ways that talking helps.

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It was around this time, in the second year of her therapy, that Pearl began to speak about the rest of her family, and to tell more of her story:

"My mother got pregnant with me the first time she had sex, at fifteen, with a fourteen-year-old boy named Owen Platt. My aunt married a white man with enough means to help us leave Jamaica. In Florida, my mother met Derek Quincey, a dark-skinned, broad-shouldered man who married her for her looks. I believe she fancied him at first. He was older and seemed interested in providing for us. His father was killed in a fight over fifty cents lost in a card game. That's when his drinking went out of control."

Mr. Quincey beat his sons, and Pearl lived in terror of his mad fits.

When Pearl had the chance to live with her aunt, Derek opposed it, saying that "the Rasta bastard" would go wild there and start popping out babies. Her mother cited her studiousness and said they should let her go. Pearl choked on the thought of leaving her mother behind, but she wanted to escape her stepfather. When her brother broke his arm, a drunken Mr. Quincey—who had hated doctors since a white physician refused his mother care—knelt on the boy's chest, cursing and insisting he could set the bone. Seeing her mother helpless against his evil, Pearl felt hate for her, too. Pearl vowed to be victimized by no man.

The exception to Derek's no-doctor rule involved little Ellie, born with a seizure disorder. For Derek to favor—of all children—this sick and weak one! Pearl remembered feeling superior to Ellie because the little girl had much darker skin than hers. Pearl had never voiced her resentment of this child to anyone. Not a word.

I made sure to ask Pearl during these sessions how she felt talking about her family.

"I feel a twinge. When I started to talk—did you notice?—I sort of whispered like they might be in the next room listening. But you know, they aren't. This is my life, and these stories belong to me, and I want to tell them."

Pearl said she wanted to say a bit more before we stopped for the day.

As a teen-ager, she continued, boys did not approach her, and she was relieved. She would do anything before proving her stepfather right and getting sent home. Better to outdo the adults in the business of good behavior.

Many a high-school girl feels insecure or overlooked, of course. Pearl's awkward stage continued through college. She insisted she was not noticed by men—not by short or tall men, not by men who grew up in the South, North, the West Indies, or abroad. She did not feel ugly, just different. "It was like I wore a sign that said 'I don't do sex, marriage, or babies.'"

I liked this talk of wearing a sign. It suggested she realized that, far from being unrecognizable in some essential way, she had made choices. The "sign" had served her well. As a woman of color, she had always to be at the top of her class to prove that she was as good as the rest. Without financial resources and with a family to support, she had worked a couple of jobs at all times. Pearl had become one with her work. A man would have been a distraction.

I asked if she ever felt otherwise now—that a relationship could make life better.

Pearl looked away and shook her head. I had the feeling I was about to get a talking-to. She asked if I had any idea of the statistical odds against an educated black woman her age finding a suitable male partner. I let her know I understood that the demographic facts were not encouraging.

"Nonetheless, I'm asking you, Pearl: What if you did meet someone you liked? Would you be interested in a relationship?"

"If it were 'raining men'? Yes, but still, who would I find to put up with me? I'm not a youngster; I'm set in my ways."

"Keep talking."

"Who would have me? I'm a terrible cook. I don't want to take care of any more kids. . . . I mess up everyone's stereotype, don't you think? Is there a man anywhere looking for a tall, guileless black lady who reads a book a day and keeps nothing in the fridge but Popsicles?"

Her questions were beginning to change. In fact, during this period, I never knew what she would bring up.

Pearl walked into her next appointment asking, "How do you do it, Deborah?"

"How do I do what, Pearl?"

She wondered how I balanced work and social life, marriage, kids, romance, private time. She believed I held certain secrets, both the keys to her own mythology and the keys to living. Would I share them or keep them to myself? If she did meet someone, could she count on me for advice? What if she fell for someone I didn't like? Could I stand to hear the details of pursuit and courtship?

Pearl wanted reassurance that I could tolerate her becoming sexually active. Her parents had managed to foreclose her curiosity and experimentation. Pearl wanted to be sure I would

not be put out, frightened, censorious, or jealous of her new adventures.

Three months into our work on these issues, Pearl had coffee one day with a psychology professor. This led to weeks of dating that felt sexually charged. She enjoyed the physical contact a lot, which she described as mostly "kissy face" (accent on the second word).

When Pearl announced those events to me, I almost knocked over the small bowl of roses at my right. She had gone from coffee to her first kissy face in three dates? So matter-of-factly?

Only then did Pearl clarify: Although she had not done any formal dating in college, she had fancied certain boys, been flirted with, danced a lot. She had even had a bit of sexual experience in graduate school. It simply hadn't added up to anything, she said. Neither to love nor to hope.

With regard to her new psychologist friend, the challenge came in the time between dates, when she was waiting for him to call. She would feel needy and pathetic. How she missed being totally in control.

I let her know she did not sound pathetic by any means. The desire to be perfect, in total control, had become a motif, and I asked if she could say more about it. It was a desire she connected with her mother's love. She had lived to be her mother's perfect daughter, thereby vindicating Rita's life of sacrifice. Pearl was beginning to glimpse the error in this: There were no perfect daughters; and showing weakness, admitting to desire, were not decisions taken against her mother.

When the psychology professor returned to his former girlfriend, Pearl was very disappointed, but she did not regret the experience. She felt a spell was broken. Pearl seemed to me more relaxed and confident, less stern a taskmaster to herself.

She had even gone out and bought a used piano, not for her nieces and nephews but for herself!

I was shocked, therefore, on arriving home from a long weekend to find a crisis message from Pearl. Her sciatica was back; she was in grinding pain. It occurred just hours after receiving some news by mail. On the strength of four chapters, a major academic publisher had accepted her book, virtually ensuring her tenure.

Pearl told me about this on the phone. She knew she had every reason to celebrate, but she felt awful. Why had the good news triggered her symptom? Why should success be so closely paired with pain? When I asked Pearl for her thoughts, she recounted the nightmare she had had that morning.

> *I am sitting high up in a tree, enjoying the view. I can't believe I have climbed so high. I look below and see a creature drowning. It is part kitten, part rabbit or rat. I am horrified, and yet happy the thing is not mine. I woke up in a sweat.*

I asked Pearl to say whatever came to mind about the dream.

"That's me up in the tree, looking down. And the creature, I think, has to be Ellie."

Here was another boat I had missed. It was during our very first conversation that Pearl had mentioned the sister who died. I assumed she died as a direct result of the epilepsy. It turned out, however, that she drowned in the creek near their house.

Pearl said that her brothers kept a canoe near the creek, and had been warned about keeping Ellie away from it. One day she wandered off just long enough to throw her toys inside and try to push it in the water. It's possible that she had a

seizure before falling, because no one heard her cry out. They found her facedown in the water.

Fifteen-year-old Pearl was terrified that Derek would blame her for Ellie's death. He did. If Pearl had been home where she belonged, he said, the child would be alive. Pearl was torn between a desire to go back and comfort her mother and a wish to stay with her aunt and finish school. Her mother made the decision for her, insisting that Pearl's education was paramount. Pearl was ostensibly relieved, and no one guessed her guilt. Friends and family had gathered around the Quincey home to mourn the child's death. Pearl, meanwhile, was sitting in a girls' school studying algebra and French.

The dream made the conflict almost unbearably clear. Pearl had climbed higher than she had ever imagined, and loved the view. She had reached that point, however, only at the expense of her sister's life. "The thing was not mine" are the words she uses in the dream, connoting her envious disparagement of Ellie.

Pearl dealt with her embarrassment of riches in the way she knew how—by giving away all she could. Ellie's death, she said, redoubled the drive to justify her privileged position. No one would accuse her of living high on the hog. She would work harder and accept fewer rewards than anyone. It was no surprise that she could not feel joy about the prospect of success.

Pearl was not the first patient of mine to become depressed over good news. One astute man observed that the unconscious seems to put an "absolute value sign" on events. Thus, we are disrupted by big changes, be they in the positive or negative direction. People have committed suicide on both losing fortunes and winning them.

Throughout her second year of therapy, Pearl talked a lot about messages the family had given her about staying and leaving, about independence and family loyalty, about gratitude

and self-indulgence. These can be complex knots for any family to untangle, but in those whose young members actually change social class, they seem particularly gnarled. Poor and working-class parents generally want their children to have opportunities they missed. Their children take up the mandate to succeed and, in so doing, end up in a world foreign to their parents. They not only do a different kind of work, they also eat different foods, enjoy different entertainment, and hold different political views. The young person in such a family may feel that, in order to show loyalty (through success), he or she must inevitably reject the family's traditions. And the young person may feel tremendous guilt about surpassing siblings and cousins economically. In some families, the successful member tries to convert those left behind to new tastes, as though envy might magically dissolve if everyone would just eat brioche and read the *New York Times* in their designer pajamas.

Pearl had tried her best to remain part of the clan. She permitted herself to enjoy certain fruits abroad, but only if she shipped some home. She was allowed to do well, but not to feel well. Giving up the dream of romantic love, she decided, was a kind of deal she had struck with God. He had taken her sister; she would soldier on, living and working for two. Loneliness would be the price she paid for her vertiginous luck.

Freud wrote evocatively about people he described as "wrecked by success." He found it bewildering, but true, ". . . that people occasionally fall ill precisely because a deeply rooted long-cherished wish has come to fulfillment. It seems then as though they could not endure their bliss." Freud gave several examples, among them that of a professor awarded a coveted university chair after the death of its occupant.

"He fell into a state of melancholy which unfitted him for all activity for some years after."

The problem, as Freud saw it, was that the immediate success in these cases resonated with a longed-for but taboo success from early life, namely the Oedipal desire to possess fully one parent, displacing the other. The feeling in adulthood that one has finally "done it" wraps certain people in the grip of a guilty wish long repressed.

There was, in Pearl's recent success, the revival of some elements of her family complexes. Pearl's underestimated rivalry with Ellie—her stepfather's favorite—had contributed, we concluded, to her years as a confirmed celibate. Her choice of the label "Darwinian finch" condensed an astonishing number of aspects of her identity. It meant that she bore the proud name of Charles Darwin, an influential scientist with a gentle soul. It meant that she was a bird, that is, a creature destined to migrate and therefore expected to leave home. Pearl would not mate or have children, thus escaping the humiliations her mother had known—living with a bully and a drunk, seeing her children abused, and giving up a life of her own.

There is another matter that comes into play in this conundrum known as "incomplete mourning" or "frozen grief." Sometimes we deal with a lost loved one by identifying unconsciously with that individual. In choosing to be a finch, Pearl was not only giving up part of her self, she was also becoming Ellie. Ellie had always been known as a child who would not grow up and have a full adult life. She wandered off one afternoon, dreaming of we-know-not-what, pushing and pulling at the little canoe she longed to board. She shipwrecked instead. Pearl had, too: indeed, this was the first thing she said about herself on entering my office. "I have shipwrecked. . . . washed up on your shore after all."

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In the third year of therapy, Pearl met Joshua, a physician and native of Cameroon. Joshua listened and he talked. He loved his own work, and he enjoyed Pearl's passion for hers. He delighted in her beauty and talent, and he did not idealize her.

The finch was in love for the first time. Daily she endured the highs and lows. I was glad to support her in those dizzy moments. When she worried that she "did not deserve . . ." I reminded her that she did deserve. When she asked if her mother could adjust to her being in love, I assured her we would continue to work on that.

As their relationship progressed toward sexual consummation, I found myself filled with delight for Pearl, and only slightly jittery. Had we talked enough about her fear of engulfment and of engulfing, her fears of penetration and of pregnancy, for her to accept the pleasures of sex?

Yes, apparently. Pearl grew to love her intimacy with Joshua. The most difficult part was her mourning over lost time.

"This whole world called the body," she said beautifully, "all these years could have been mine."

Pearl's plaits grew to shoulder length and the beads more ornate. Emboldened, fledged, no longer wary, she enjoyed everything she did in a heightened way.

Those floaty months of pleasure—how long can human beings bear them? Pearl was not sure how to tell Joshua she needed more time alone. At length they had "the talk," about time spent together and alone. This should have solved the problem, she thought. However, there were days she would have traded all the pleasures of love for a month alone to write and think. Sometimes she wished for no relationship at all.

"I'm ashamed. I must be the textbook definition of neurosis. Do you think I might be one of those people who simply have no talent for happiness?"

I did not. I thought she was smack in the middle of the porcupine dilemma. Whenever Joshua held back, she rushed toward him; when he made himself available, she withdrew. To me she was not an exotic bird, unchosen and unchoosable, but a porcupine like everybody else—a creature social and capable of reproducing, but one who would forever seek the right distance between the painful extremes of entanglement and isolation.

Pearl was eager for her mother to meet Joshua, but Rita came up with a dozen reasons why she couldn't do so. I wondered if this was about Joshua being a physician, or about his being African. "I think it's about his being a man," said Pearl. "It's about his being not her."

Pearl had always been glad not to have one of those mothers who were always needling their daughters to marry. She was unprepared, however, for what turned out to be a prolonged indifference—even hostility—on her mother's part toward her relationship. That her mother, always proud of her achievements, should not join in her delight over this development filled Pearl with anger.

Here we labored for a long time. It was, perhaps, the most profound piece of mourning Pearl had to face—less dramatic but infinitely more bitter than mourning her sister, or even "lost time."

Rita Quincey had wanted to spare her daughter the disappointments of marriage. No doubt she also felt protected by her unmarried daughter, and loved being Pearl's confidante. Despite her peregrinations, Pearl seemed to be the one child who would never leave her.

It was at this point in therapy that Pearl reconsidered an interpretation I had made years earlier: that the sciatica was yet another means of staying connected to her mother. The notion had been meaningless to her three years ago; it was simply a coincidence, she said, that both she and her mother suffered from chronic back trouble. Now she saw it differently. The pain they shared in this particular part of the body marked them both as women who did hard physical work. They could commiserate, they could feel for each other. As a teen-ager, Pearl realized, the pain had allowed her not to have to feel that she was a spoiled girl on permanent holiday. Like her mother, she was a hard-working black woman, laboring to support her family. A symptom that made her feel connected to her mother's body would not, she realized, be a symptom easily given up.

Much has been written about the mother-daughter relationship in the past few decades. Some of this writing refutes the rather dim view Freud took of the bond between mothers and their female children. In the tendency of mothers to overidentify with daughters in the early, "pre-Oedipal" stage, Freud saw the origins of women's "lesser capacities" for autonomy and objectivity. In the 1970s and 1980s psychoanalytic feminists wrote about mother-daughter identification in a more complex way. Indeed, they said, the blurred ego boundaries between a mother and her girls may lead her to assume she knows their feelings before they do. Yes, it may lead them to cling to each other. What is lost in terms of autonomy, however, may be made up in the positive qualities of empathy and loyalty.

The psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow writes about differences between boys and girls at the pre-Oedipal stage. The boy's first intimate connection in life is with a cross-sex parent, and the girl's with a same-sex parent: in both cases, the mother. Boys are expected to switch their identification and become like the males in their family. Girls do not experience that rupture; they are expected to maintain their original identification.

Chodorow maintains that this fact contributes to girls' greater tendency for continuity and connection to others. It can also trap girls into those very things, however.

Therapists, fiction writers, and memoirists have set themselves to describing this set of issues. On the subject of mothers and daughters, Jamaica Kincaid is again most eloquent. In adolescence, Annie John reflects:

> Something I could not name just came over us, and suddenly I had never loved anyone so or hated anyone so. But to say hate—what did I mean by that? Before, if I hated someone I simply wished the person dead. But I couldn't wish my mother dead. If my mother died, what would become of me? I couldn't imagine my life without her. Worse than that, if my mother died, I would have to die, too, and even less than I could imagine my mother dead could I imagine myself dead.

Pearl was beginning to distinguish her desires from her mother's, as some girls do in adolescence. She wrote letters home, angry and plangent. She read drafts to me until she had the tone just right. Pearl never stopped loving her mother, but her capacity to love, admire, and desire expanded its embrace. Instead of phoning home for a few minutes each day, she began calling for an hour on Sundays. Pearl prevailed upon her brothers and sister to do some of their mother's banking and doctor's appointments—things she had done from a distance.

Pearl practiced some distancing moves on me. She, who had never canceled a session without a good reason—and certainly not without notice—was now canceling frequently. There were three occasions on which I would have charged her, in fact, had I followed my policy meticulously. I had explained the

cancellation rule to her at the outset. When I raised the matter once again, Pearl refused to engage me, insisting that she had been "fiendishly busy" of late. I took that fact into account and fortified it with some vague sense of her specialness. The latter, I eventually realized, was something I needed to analyze in myself.

The words going through my mind were: "It's Pearl. How can I charge her when she . . . has had such a hard life . . . never believed in therapy in the first place . . . has done so well . . . is someone who sacrifices for others, and who wouldn't understand my need to charge for missed sessions?"

This was not trivial stuff! Many patients come in skeptical about therapy. Many have had hard lives. Pearl was by no means the most deprived person I had ever had in my care. What exactly was going on here?

I believe we were reenacting the relationship she had with her mother, in which clear boundaries were sacrificed and conflict foreclosed by the wish to be close and unique to the other. I had to ask myself if cultural factors were in play as well. How else to make sense of my musing that "she wouldn't understand my policy"? The more I thought about this particular free association, the more condescending and suspect it sounded. Was this a bit of unconscious racism dressed up as magnanimity? I half-hoped the issue would go away, but it did not. Pearl then called to cancel a session because she wasn't feeling well. We rescheduled the appointment but she didn't show up. She called that evening to say she had forgotten about it completely. I mentioned I would have to bill her for the missed session.

At the time of the phone call, Pearl hadn't protested, but in our next session, I noticed her fighting tears as she wrote out the check. I encouraged her to speak.

Therapy was an extravagance in the first place, she said. To pay this hefty sum for no session at all was outrageous. She knew it was customary for therapists to work in this way, but that only showed how out of touch the profession was with people's lives.

I sensed she was still holding back, and I invited her to continue.

"I haven't formulated my thoughts, and I don't want to keep blurting stuff out."

"Sometimes the truth likes to be blurted out."

"I don't know! But I can't help thinking how hard most people in this world work for one hundred ten dollars. That includes the people in my family; they work hard for that money! Can you really appreciate it, coming from your background? It just hurts somehow that even with someone like you, there comes a limit between black and white, a limit of understanding."

Few things are as unnerving as confronting one's own racism, or being described as insensitive to race. I felt embarrassed and sad, but also encouraged by her willingness to speak her mind. I wondered if she had felt this limit at other times in our work.

"Last year, a college friend of mine told me her therapist was black, and it made me curious, you know, about the difference that might make. But, no, I have never felt until now that there was this limit between us. Like, 'You just don't get me.'"

We talked a bit about her fantasy of what it might be like having a black therapist, and exactly what it was about her that I wasn't "getting." We had reached the end of the hour, and I mentioned that we didn't have to wrap this up in one session. We could (and we did) return to the question of race and its meaning in our relationship.

Pearl was right about limits. No white person, regardless of sympathies, based or not on some shared experience of bigotry or poverty, can know from the inside the experience of any person of color. Race matters, and we err profoundly in not acknowledging the gap. And no therapist can understand any patient fully, even when their race and class backgrounds are similar. That we are fairly guaranteed to misunderstand each other is a useful if humbling truth. Psychoanalytic therapy is devoted to marking our longing for clairvoyant love, and our difficulty in recognizing all others as other.

As for the rules about time and money, it was clear to me that Pearl never would have allowed herself that candor had I not decided finally to apply my policy. To proceed along unspoken lines such as "How can I charge this poor black woman?" was, I realized, a countertransference problem, a simple rescue fantasy. Perhaps if I could grant her the privilege of not paying, her life would have less privation, her playing field would feel a bit more level. . . .

As we have seen in the other cases, a "resistance" to making the unconscious conscious belongs to the therapist as well as to the patient. For both, there is a yes and a no, always. I saw my not charging Pearl as a bit of resistance to doing the work. That is, sensing that Pearl was expressing anger or resentment through her no-shows, I nonetheless chose to let them pass, rather than invite her criticism. It was an act of self-protection. Realizing this made me flash on the story she had told early on about the racist white clerk who lined their hats with tissue paper to "protect" the heads of white customers. All therapists at some moment with every patient construct a kind of protective lining to shield themselves from what is going on inside the patient's head. One wants to know and yet one also does not want to know. . . . Unique to psychoanalytic training

is the emphasis on disciplining oneself to face rather than disavow one's own resistances.

What if Pearl had had a black therapist? Race would still have mattered, but differently, as the experiences of therapists of color have shown. The psychoanalyst Kimberlyn Leary, for example, writes of her experience with African American patients who worry if she is "black enough" (or, perhaps, "too black"). Race operates in therapy also when both patient and therapist are Caucasian. I had a white patient years back who periodically entered my office slinging racist criticisms of our black receptionist. In minutes the patient and I would be in a heated and thoroughly unproductive debate about racial stereotyping. One day I saw a pattern: She always made these comments when she was actually angry at me—for being late, changing her appointment time, or simply pushing her too hard to talk. This woman found it nearly impossible to get mad at someone she liked. It was much nicer to think of joining with me against someone who seemed to her an easy target. My interpretation about her use of race marked a turning point in our therapy.

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In the week that followed our discussion about the fee, Pearl phoned to apologize about spouting off. She seemed surprised to learn that I was not irritated with her, and that I was no less pleased to see her the following week. This helped her to understand that getting angry with close friends, with Joshua, and maybe even with her mother might be possible. Porcupine-style withdrawal was not the only way of negotiating distances in love.

Pearl was enjoying her new relationship, her friends, her teaching. She was not at all sure, however, that she would remain at the university. On some days, she felt an ethical imperative to stay. There were now three graduate students who had chosen the department because they wanted to work with her, and their needs haunted her days. At other times, she felt she had to leave because she could never be happy at an institution of that kind. For the first time, her happiness was allowed to matter.

Pearl arranged to take an unpaid leave of absence to finish her book and discreetly look for other jobs. She would spend most of that time working in Africa with Joshua, and meeting his family. They were committed to each other, although the relationship had its sticking points, notably the question of children. Joshua wanted eight. "Now it's true that that's seven or eight more than I want, but he's not implacable. I'll bargain him down before long, you'll see."

Pearl knew we had not solved all her life's problems and that the question of kids was serious. She had never really considered being a mother until she met Joshua, she said. She felt sure he would be an involved parent, and that she wouldn't be sacrificing everything if they had a family.

Before she left the country, we cut our sessions back to every other week and then every third. Pearl cried like a little girl the day we said good-bye. She gave me a packet of her writings inscribed in a tender way. I heard nothing from her for nearly a year. Then one spring morning Pearl called saying she was back in the U.S. and wanted to say hello. I was delighted to greet her in my office.

She had loved her time in Africa, and pulled out photos of herself dressed in gowns of kinte cloth and standing next to a

handsome man with very black skin. She had finished her book and written some poetry as well.

And what had she decided to do about her career?

She had accepted a job at a college in Georgia—a place less prestigious than the one she had left, but one that promised to be more rewarding. They valued teaching.

The matter of children—How many? Adopted or biological? And when?—remained unsettled. And then there was the question of her mother. Mrs. Quincey wanted to move closer to the couple, and although Joshua liked the idea, Pearl wasn't so sure.

I looked at Pearl. She was so different that day from the woman who had entered my office more than four years ago. Then she had been wracked with an inflamed sciatic nerve, lonely, insomniac, ruminating over obsolete words for grief—indeed, living with an obsolete self-description. Now she appeared vital, relaxed, hopeful.

I asked if she would allow me to include her in a book I hoped to write about psychotherapy. She gave an emphatic "yes!" as though a weight had been lifted.

"Our work has made so much possible: my book, finding Joshua, surviving my tribulations. I would love to give something back to you."

And so she did.

5 THE SIN EATER

EIGHT DOLLARS and ten cents an hour. That's what we, a top-notch team of psychologists and social workers, were earning in the early 1980s at our world-famous children's hospital and community mental health center.

I had been simmering quietly over this for some time, never reaching full boil until our director called a special meeting. Dr. Claude Bradley wished to announce that our caseloads would be increased by 20 percent, effective immediately. Were there any questions?

I raised my hand.

"We're working twelve-hour days as it is, Claude. Some of us are still in analysis and many have spouses and kids. I calculated my hourly wage last night, and here is my comment: I can't believe the amount of work I'm doing now for eight dollars an hour, and I'm not dying to do more."

No one moved.

"When did *you* get a raise?" came a voice behind me.

That would be Jeff, the class clown.

Claude was sympathetic. He was a decent, overworked guy who could have been making a mint in a different setting. He