

Evelyn's Case

Dr. Martin Heinrich's afternoon appointments' included his suicidal client at 1pm followed by Mrs. Meyers at 2:15. The morning had been his usual back-to-back sessions. He'd have time for a jog and a podcast interview before Evelyn was scheduled to slide onto his loveseat at 5:30pm. The hour couldn't come soon enough.

A snow globe depicting an Austrian ski scene sat on a mahogany side table in his office. A letter from his publisher hung on the wall celebrating his book hitting the *New York Times* bestseller list.

"Can't we negotiate that book contract?" His wife asked again this morning. Lydia's life was now workout classes, spats with friends and reading hefty novels in the quiet music store she owned in downtown Montpelier, Vermont. She used to play the piano in the living room. Breakfast was now their last movement together.

The Greek revival house they had purchased in town had bedrooms they had not ventured into in years. They had bought it for the children that never came. Now they held onto secrets like cheat notes from the teacher.

"It doesn't expire. It was my first book," he reminded her, trying to pour coffee from an empty pot.

"Then why don't you write another one so they can pay us the royalties we deserve? All you are doing is making the publisher rich, Marty."

Podcasts and interviews helped pay the mortgages on the homes in Vermont and in Maine, but the requests were constant. The book required 24-hour tech support, and he was the only technician on call.

He heard footsteps coming upstairs to his office on the 2nd floor of the old Victorian building, passing the hair salon on the first floor and the accounting office on the second.

The suicidal businessman entered his office looking exhausted from the relentless self-criticism that followed him everywhere. His appearance resembled the actor Mel Gibson, but the spotlight had gone out from his life, and he was hoping the doctor could help him find the light switch.

"Have the thoughts of suicide persisted?" the Doctor asked after a few pleasantries. He had wound the snow globe on the side table so that the ski lift went up and down the mountain. It lasted almost an hour, slowing down to tell the Doctor that the session was running out.

The patient sat on the couch and nodded his head vigorously. For the next 55 minutes, he poked at the disappointments in his life like they were a sandwich he never ordered in the first place.

The Doctor hardly spoke. The ski lift went round and round. Maybe go skiing this year with a few buddies? Outside the window, a great maple tree ripe with sap brushed against the building. The tree was in bad need of pruning, a simple landscaping job that the Doctor could do himself, and he could sell the syrup. He would not need to speak to anyone all day.

A diploma hung off center between the two narrow windows, and the Doctor noticed it was askew.

"A landscaper, Marty?" his father had asked when he entered Syracuse on partial scholarship. His father viewed money like it was Novocaine to his life, and there was never enough.

"No money in landscaping, Marty."

The diploma read: *Dr. Martin Heinrich, Doctor of Psychiatry, Syracuse University.*

If he were to re-frame the way he thought of his practice, it would be that he was a gardener of sorts. He would tell patients which thoughts to combine in their window boxes. But the overall design he kept to himself. For that, patients would need to keep climbing up the stairs and get into the dirt.

"Happiness is a recipe; one-part childhood, one-part predetermination, and the rest just pure attitude toward life's unfolding events," Dr. Heinrich wrote in his best-selling book, *Mind Your Mind*.

At 61 years old, the Doctor still retained youthful good looks, and he was articulate and pleasant in interviews.

"Did anyone ever tell you that you look like Ted Danson?" an Australian interviewer once asked. His thick grey hair gave him the look of a learned physician.

In this way, Dr. Heinrich had built a practice and royalty stream with 37 clients and \$325K in recurring revenue.

But the practice was never satisfied. It was like a hungry animal that fed on every hour of the Doctor's time. Lydia counted out the revenue like chips at a casino table. The accounting firm Lydia hired spit out numbers for him to exceed each year.

The patient departed, and the Doctor sat in his office and made notes in his spiral notebook. The pages on Evelyn stuck together from the ink. An old brass clock sat on his desk. He pushed the answering machine button and checked his messages.

"Can't we at least have a lawyer look at the contract Marty?" It was an old message.

When Evelyn first came to his office, she discussed her ex-boyfriend who had started as a friend and a co-worker, but had become a clever stalker.

"Maybe it is time to call the police Evelyn," he said during the last session.

Call me anytime, Evelyn.

She paused and told him that she already had, but did not elaborate.

"After I dropped out of UVM, I met Benji at the Ramen shop where I waitressed," she said. "He was the cook, the cute cook" she said, as if that explained the relationship.

"Why did you drop out of UVM?" Dr. Heinrich asked.

"Because I don't want to be a business major selling my father's worthless paintings in my mother's basement. I could care less." Then she added: "Why doesn't Audrey sell that crap herself, the old hustler?"

She paused, then parroted her mother. "Don't call me Audrey, I'm your goddamn mother," she said.

Evelyn had moved in with Benji. They partied, did drugs, and drank their share. They pushed each other playfully in all sorts of relationship ways. It was cool, no big deal really until she became slightly attached to one of his friends whom they swapped with on occasion, and Benji started pushing her downstairs, then running down and finishing the job.

"Bitch," he called her, then, "I'm sorry, I love you."

"I love you too," she cried, serving him dinner, bruised, pushing a smile.

The Doctor asked; "how long since you moved in with your Mom?"

"Three months," she said, "of non-stop Hell." She sat on the office loveseat; her body was angled toward him with one high heel dangling in the air. She lacked classical

good looks, making her beauty his own discovery, like a nondescript ticket girl whose mysterious eyes dart out when she fumbles for your change.

Then the girl looks up and says, "Enjoy the show."

Martin Heinrich sat on his favorite park bench overlooking the narrow Winooski river. He had just completed a 4-mile jog. A stranger shared the bench with him.

His cell phone rang, and he tried to decipher the number in the bright sunlight. He used the shadow beneath the bench to identify the caller. His wedding ring pressed against the phone.

"Dr. Heinrich speaking."

"Dr. Heinrich, it's Evelyn McGregor."

"Hello, Evelyn." Hearing nothing back, he added, "Is everything OK?"

"I can't make it today," she said quickly. "Something...came up. Wait, hold on."

There was noise on the line, like she was in a car. "Do you need to speak now?" he asked. He was talking to no one.

Call me anytime, Evelyn.

"Now is not a good time," she said after retrieving the phone.

"Ok. Would you like to reschedule?" he asked. "Let me check," and he held the phone in his lap for a moment and looked down. He was playing with a stick in the snow. "Can you come by tomorrow late morning, say 11:00 am?"

A half-filled soda bottle bounced its way downstream through the rocks.

"I can't go on like this," she said.

"Is he calling you? Wanting to see you? Showing up? What's going on?"

"I can't talk now. I think he's here. 11 o'clock tomorrow is good."

He heard the click but still held the phone to his ear. He dropped the cell phone, and it fell in the old spring snow, stained with boot prints and dirt.

"Problems?" the man on the bench asked.

"Yeah," Martin said, annoyed, and then doubled back a look at the stranger.

The man could be dressed for a sunset beach party in Greece, long grey hair pulled neatly into a ponytail. He struck Martin as a well dressed hippie.

"Wait, what?" Martin asked, now looking at the man.

"What do you do in Montpelier?" the old hippie asked.

"I'm a psychiatrist."

"Oh, really?"

The time was 4pm. The podcast would start in 15 minutes.

"I've always wanted to ask a psychiatrist something. May I?"

"Go ahead."

The old hippie turned his head to the sky and wrinkled his forehead. He grimaced. "Who counsels the counselor, Counselor?"

"No one." His answer surprised himself, both in the speed of his response and the words themselves.

"But isn't it strange.... I mean, hearing everyone's problems all the time?" He did not look at Martin as he spoke. Instead, he threw small rocks toward the river.

"What brings you to Montpelier? Do you live here?" Martin asked.

"I'm a therapist of sorts myself," he responded.

"That so?"

"In a way."

No one spoke.

"I'm a magician in my spare time. I do tricks, give people something to think about other than their own problems."

"That's not a therapist. I am throwing a 50th birthday party for my wife. Maybe we can hire you. Do you have a card?"

"Not for hire but thank you. I am here just visiting my.... sister...but we could try a trick right now, if you like."

Martin shrugged. "Sure," he said, intrigued.

"Think of a number between 1 and 15," he challenged.

He closed his eyes. "OK. I have."

The man looked hard at Martin, analyzing him. "Your number is 11, " he said.

Martin grimaced. "Actually, you're right -----but that was just a lucky guess." He looked up to the man who was now standing over him. "How did you know?"

"Actually, you wrote it in the snow with that stick."

Martin dropped the stick he had been holding.

"OK. That's not much of a trick, but I get it. Didn't know you were listening so intently to my call. Thanks for that."

"How long have you been seeing her?"

"Who?"

"Evelyn. The girl on the phone."

"I think this conversation is over."

"Don't worry, Doctor Heinrich. I'm not a judge, I'm a magician. I do tricks at kid's parties. No big deal. Nice to meet you," the man said, and walked toward downtown.

The podcast started at 3:45 and went on for one hour.

"Controlling your thoughts is like tending a garden, a lush field filled with spring flowers and rooting vegetables," he said to the wide audience. The analogy had been falling flat for years, but he propped it up anyway.

The half-filled soda bottle was trapped in the rocks when the podcast concluded. A row of stone steps working their way down the river would be a great addition.

"So, is Marty making time for you?" Audrey asked her daughter while driving through the streets of Montpelier. The car was a Silver Subaru, 11 years old.

"Yes, anytime. He makes time. It's good."

"Do you feel you are making progress? Is this going to work?"

"I think so, Mother."

An old woman walked her food basket across the walkway, an eternity. Audrey pressed on the horn.

"Audrey!" Evelyn said.

"Don't call me Audrey," she shot back. "Can you really ring him anytime? "

"Yeah, Mom."

"So, what's next?"

"I have no idea. You tell me."

They passed a small movie house, and a new Asian restaurant. Audrey was 15 years in Montpelier, the last 10 alone since Evelyn's father had left without even saying much, leaving a trove of paintings in the basement and a bill at the hardware store. She never bothered to get a divorce, too expensive. He had moved in with a woman he described by email as someone else. The divorce was still not final, but there was nothing to divide. Audrey had inherited the house from her parents and UVM tuition was left to her in the small trust. Bookkeeping paid the bills and selling her husband's paintings was to be Evelyn's job.

"I got this, Mother" Evelyn concluded, looking out the side-view window.

"Just get it done."

"Why don't you leave me the hell alone?"

"Don't talk to me that way."

"I'll talk to you..." Evelyn said, tightening her jaw.

"That's your disease talking, Evelyn. How are you feeling today?"

Evelyn parroted her mother's words. "How are you feeling today?"

"Did you cancel your appointment today with him?"

"No, not yet Mother."

Audrey drove on toward the diner they were heading to for lunch. "Ok, then call him now."

"Jesus, you are relentless."

Evelyn picked up the phone. The phone was picked up after several rings. "Dr. Heinrich, it's Evelyn McGregor." Pause. "I can't make it today." Pause.

"Something...came up. Wait, hold on." Evelyn held the phone on her lap, and the mother and daughter looked at one another. "Now is not a good time," she said into the phone.

The conversation went on for another minute. "I can't talk now. I think he's here. 11 o'clock tomorrow is good." She hung up.

"Happy?" Evelyn said, looking out the window.

"We'll see tomorrow," Audrey replied.

Evelyn's autoimmune disease was the other presence in their lives. It did the talking, Audrey figured, and it did the destruction to whatever hopes she had of Evelyn entering the business world. Her bookkeeping job had no upside other than seeing the obscene amounts of money that other people made. Dr. Heinrich's practice was just another example, there in black and white with deductions and exemptions and exaggerations.

"Won't you please ask Martin to see my daughter and give me your opinion?" The question was asked during a tax planning session with Lydia.

"Happy to," she said.

It didn't take long for the Doctor to start seeing the girl thrice per week.

Ask Marty boy for Klonopin and Percocet. Lots of them.

The Subaru passed a well-dressed hippie walking down the sidewalk. The three of them waved to each other.

"There he goes," Audrey said. The man disappeared into the police precinct.

Audrey turned the car in the Safeway parking lot, and a young man got out of a waiting car, darted his eyes, and approached Audrey's car on foot.

"What do you need?" Audrey asked the young man.

The narrow steps of the old Victorian building gave way to the sound of Evelyn's heels. A leather jacket would be adventurous. A blouse would be revealing.

She entered the office and settled into the loveseat. Leather jacket with pink straps.

"What happened yesterday?" he began.

"Jerk Off was sitting on my porch. He knocked on my door. No one was home except me. I was scared, I didn't want to go out."

"Did you call the police?"

Evelyn began to cry. "No! I don't want this anymore.... any of this! Including my mother's crap!" She reached out her hand, like she was getting out of a lifeboat, and he took hold. Her hand felt smooth and delicate.

"Did you take your medication today?"

"No."

"Would you like something now?"

"Yes....no," she said. "Just give me some, and I will take it home. Maybe a little."

The doctor walked over to the sample case and took out a bottle that he had prepared earlier. As he returned, she was setting an application on her phone. She buried it in her bag when the Doctor noticed.

"You know which ones are which?" he said, handing over the bottle.

"Yes, of course." She placed the bottle in her purse.

When he had taken her hand, it was a call for help. Sometimes he could give patients this help in words, sometimes through silence or other means. He sat down next to her, and she made room.

"You know consciously that there is nothing to fear. That you are safe here."

She raised her eyes to meet his. "I know," she said. "Thank you."

"Let's reframe this," he said, glancing up at his book award.

"Sure," she said, confused.

"Pick up that snow globe beside you. Close your eyes."

Evelyn picked up the globe and held it in both hands. The ornament sat on the edge of her smooth knees.

"This snow globe is your fear."

He placed his hand over hers.

"The globe is as separate from your body as the cars you hear passing by." A truck was backing itself up on South Main Street, beeping to clear its way.

She placed both her hands on top of his, and the Doctor pulled back at the touch. She draped her arm on his shoulder and looked into his eyes.

The Doctor got up and started heading for his chair. A light panic went through his body.

"Wait," she said. She held out her hand into the space between them, and after a pause, took it in his. She pulled him back onto the couch, and there was an awkward space between them.

"Do you think the medication that you gave me is helping?"

"I wouldn't hand it to you if I didn't think so."

"Maybe I need something else as well. Valium maybe?"

"We can try Valium."

She rested her hand on his knee and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Thank you," she said.

"What was that for?"

"For being Dr. Heinrich," Evelyn said and moved closer to him. A half hour, perhaps more, passed with only sound as a witness.

Click-clack went her heels on her way down the wooden staircase. Her autoimmune disease and struggles with her identity made her fodder for his next book. He would only have to change the names. The connection between them, well, connections were part of the human experience.

The Doctor sat in his wing back chair looking at his 20-year-old computer that, had he cared, he would update. His phone rang.

"Dr. Heinrich speaking."

"Doctor?" The voice was shaky. "Audrey McGregor, Doctor."

"Audrey! Well hello. How can I help you?"

"I have some.... concerns, Dr. Heinrich."

Around and around went the ski lift, now just a smudged souvenir. The old brass clock told a time that didn't matter.

"Here is how this is going to roll," she said.

Outside his window, the overnight frost and subsequent warm day meant that the sap was running strong inside the great maple tree.