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The Therapy Session

A man had been engaged to a young, beautiful woman. To be fair, by most standards, the woman was not so young or so beautiful. But she was beautiful to the man to whom she'd been engaged, and when they were together and alone, they often felt as young as white flowers in a spring meadow.

Alas, the young woman died a sudden and tragic death in an auto accident. Even before the two could be married, which they had planned to do before God at the Church of Saint Agnes that coming April.

Naturally, the man felt as though his white flowers of the spring meadow had been ripped from his heart, that the head of shadowy death had bent down, breathed upon him its sour breath, and with its thorny maw, tore out, chewed, and swallowed up his beloved white flower bouquet.

Now, for the man, the difficulty coping with his fiancé's death was persisting long past the time of bereavement when family and friends sent flowers and cards and made phone calls to check on him. Yes, my friend, he was depressed. Maybe worse. Stuck in denial and despair much of the time. Sure, he was able to arrive to his work site on time and do his job (he worked for an electric company, hanging and repairing lines). Perhaps it helped to distract him from his depression, working above ground in the sun and the wind, the heat and the cold with the threat of electricity pulsing through live wires, crows and pigeons and sparrows occasionally zinging past his ears.

It was when he lowered himself down in the bucket lift, got into his truck and drove home that the depression reared its dull, numb, overbearing head. The emptiness of his small, one level, single bedroom house was a presence he felt even more than the warmth in the air about him.

Cook dinner, sure. But the thought of moving his body across the kitchen to open the cupboard door, to raise his arm to reach for a can of soup. And then to open the drawer to pull out the can opener. And then to clamp the can opener blades down onto the edge of the can ... all that, just to face the arduous activity of opening the can, dumping out the contents, and heating up and occasionally stirring the soup ... well, sometimes he felt it was too much for him to manage.

If, dear reader, you have never experienced such grief, such depression, let's pray you never do. Life for the man lacked not only the cheer of sunshine, the humor of good comradery, but also the satisfaction of a well prepared meal. Perhaps more detrimental, he lacked a sense of direction and place in life. Yes, my friend, he lacked meaning to his days, and he did not see much point to living, except to maintain his existence in the hopes that his emotional state may someday improve.

If he had one anchor, one root keeping him grounded like the white spring meadow flowers, he knew a meaningful life was possible, for he had known a meaningful life before his fiancé's tragic death. Life, up until that rupture had been fairly fulfilling. And he recognized that his depression was a result of her death. Thus, it was possible that he could again

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find meaning and purpose. However, all that was logic, which changed little his state of mind and heart.

One night, after a long day of work and after a bowl of corn chowder and buttered rolls, the man decided to try something different. He'd heard about a new method of therapy online. Having little time outside hanging electrical wire (he worked fifty to sixty hours a week), he decided to give it a try and he downloaded the product right away. After paying a hefty fee, of course.

But the ads for the product sounded positive. Encouraging. Even enthusiastic. There were uplifting personal testimonies. People smiled a lot. There was a healthy young dog with a shiny coat of hair running about with its master in the grass and sunshine. There was a butterfly, fluttering about without a care in the world. Even a view to the shoreline of sandy beach with blue and white waves rolling calmly into shore. He was not entirely certain what the images of the shore were supposed to represent. For, he knew the ocean could be a terribly dangerous place, undertows and typhoons and all. But, after some reflection, he figured the shore footage represented some sense of calm and strength, since in the film, there did not appear to be any undertow and there certainly were no signs of storms on the horizon. Indeed, he was convinced, and he felt he needed help that very evening.

"Hello," a calm, feminine-like voice sounded into the silence of his kitchen. "Tell me, how are you feeling today?"

Slightly startled by the voice suddenly sounding before him, the man paused. And during that pause, the voice sounded again. "Your fifty-minute session has begun. Approximately forty-nine and a half minutes remain."

The man then noticed that the voice had a flat intonation. And sometimes there came little, unnatural pauses between the words, as though the cadence of the speech was off or poorly spliced together. Clearly, there was no human being on the other end.

"Session?" the man, confused, asked the voice.

"The fifty-minute session you scheduled and paid for moments earlier. Please tell me how you are feeling...." The voice seemed to be waiting. Perhaps even impatiently.

"Well, to be honest, I'm pretty pissed off. I paid all that for just one session?"

"Pissed off," the voice lamely repeated back to him. "I sense you may be encountering complications with anger. In that case, anger management -," the voice was interrupted by the man's.

"Hell, yeah, I'm angry. I just paid \$280.00 for a product I thought I could use over and over. But all I get is a fifty-minute session? That's a rip-off if I've ever heard one."

"Indeed," came the slightly unnatural voice, responding sometimes with longer than normal pauses between sentences. "I sense a strong tone of anger in your voice. I understand. You are likely feeling angry about something that happened to you, likely in your formative years, or about

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the way you had been treated by someone who was and still is important to you, such as your father or an uncle close to your family. Please, tell me more about what happened and how you feel about it now."

"Look, your ad should have explicitly stated that the \$280 was for only one session, a measly fifty minutes long at that. It's false advertising, and I feel the need to be refunded immediately."

"Indeed. Refunded. I understand. You have the right to feel refunded. And you should embrace that feeling. All human feelings and emotions are valid, legitimate, and acceptable. You can feel free and open to express any emotion in my presence. I am without judgement. I am here before you to listen."

"What d'you mean, "in your presence"? You're just a voice coming from a machine. Now this is the second thing you've got wrong in all this hullabaloo. What I want is my money back."

"My presence is my voice in the real time as I speak before you. My existence is being demonstrated to you as we speak. Money is not an emotion. I want you to express all your strongest, deepest, most complex emotions for me."

"You sound outrageous."

"No. It is not outrageous. To express your emotions is not outrageous in the slightest. Let me be the first to open up the door of feeling for you. Let us open up the door of your expression. Let all the insides out. Let them go out the door. Let them go for a walk. Or a run. Or a frisky scamper. Now, tell me how you feel. Without fear of judgement. Because I am not here to judge any emotion or expression of emotion you have."

"I've had enough of this. How you can possibly judge my emotions? You're a voice coming from a machine. A program trained to respond based on certain information." The man sighed with disbelief. His money squandered. No hope in sight of curing his problems. "I feel like a beer," he announced aloud, by way of saying that he needed a drink.

He got up from the kitchen table and took a can of beer from the fridge. He opened the top with a loud sounding crack. He took a large gulp.

"Beer is a legitimate feeling. Mood altering. Perhaps disorienting. I understand how you feel. About the sound I heard. The cracking sound. I like that expression of the beer you are feeling and I encourage you to go further. Go deeper with that feeling. We are here today to explore your feelings. To express your feelings. I encourage you. Go deeper. Go further."

The voice continued on a long, dry explanation of why it is important to express and come to an understanding of one's feelings.

By the time the voice had finished, the man had finished the beer. At the encouragement of the voice, he cracked open another. You know, expressing and exploring his feelings, and all.

"That is very good," the voice responded to the second loud cracking sound. "I am pleased with your progress already."

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Then there was a pause.

"Your session," followed the voice, "is now twenty-seven minutes until expiration."

"Great," said the man. "Look how much we've accomplished in the first twenty-three minutes. At least I'm starting to feel the beer."

"Yes. Yes," the voice repeated itself without a change in tone. Again, "Yes. You have made great accomplishments in our time together. I encourage you to continue to make that visceral cracking sound. Release that anger in a healthy way." The voice went on another lengthy, encouraging speech about how positive it is to release one's anger through a healthy, constructive activity.

So, the man took out another beer and cracked that one open too.

"Look," the man said, "it's not anger that I have a problem with."

"Oh, no. That is a regression. That sounds like denial."

"No. Really. I have other issues. Serious issues."

"No. That is a diversion, drawing the focus away from the real issue at hand: your anger. And just when you were making progress. I urge you to refocus."

"Listen. How can I make this clear to you? I am angry about the fee. But that is nothing compared with the larger issue. It hounds me day and night. For well over a year now."

"We can address other issues you may have at another time. Issues with hounds, as you say, or any other dogs. But, now, let us not lose sight of the major issue: your anger."

"Look ... there was a death," the man started abruptly, not knowing how to best introduce the subject.

"Okay. A death occurred. Would you like me to order a sympathy card? The price is negligent, considering the significant life event."

"What?"

"A bouquet of flowers? They can be shipped overnight and arrive tomorrow. Again, price is negligent, considering the significant life event."

"No. Listen, I don't need anything shipped."

"Tell me, what funeral services will you need to arrange? I am here to help you. Rest assured. I have a suite of services designed for all life events at your disposal. For additional fees, yes. But our suite offers you competitive prices and efficient services at all hours of the day."

"Look ... you don't understand ..." he broke off, not knowing how to openly talk about the matter.

"I do understand. There has been a death. And there are always many arrangements to be made in the event of a death. Perhaps you need a new suit. We can take your measurements and you can select from a variety of fitted options to be shipped overnight. For extra fees, naturally."

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The man sighed. "The death happened well over a year ago. We've already had the burial. My spring meadow flower has been deep underground ever since. I don't need a suit or a sympathy card or anything ordered or shipped and I certainly don't need any extra fees."

"Yes. Flowers die. How sad when they do. How they wither so. And lose their once vibrant colors." Then there was a brief pause. "So, what appears to be the problem?"

"Ahh...." the man sighed with discouragement, again not knowing how to begin.

"Your choice to bring up a death that happened well over a year ago is a diversion from facing your true issue: your anger."

The man was aghast. Incredulous. He could think of nothing to say.

In the pause came, "Your session is now thirteen minutes until expiration."

The man needed something stronger. \$280 dollars escaping down the drain before his eyes, and all for what? He reached for the whiskey. Poured out a double and drank it down.

"Listen to what I am going to tell you. Yes, the death happened well over a year ago. But I am still not over it. I can't move on. That's the problem."

"Since the death happened so long ago, I fail to see the problem. It is in the past."

"And yet it's not in the past. It's in the present. Before me everyday when I wake up. Everyday when I go to sleep. If I can sleep. That's the problem. I'm stuck."

"Okay. Let us work on finding a way of getting you unstuck."

"Yes!" the man rang out, alleviation in his voice. "Yes. That is what I need. Can you help me?"

"Of course. I am here to help. Don't worry. Describe for me the position you are in."

"Well, I feel as though I'm facing a wall. A high wall of numbness. Nothing seems to have much meaning anymore."

"Okay. No problem. You will simply need to go around the wall."

"Right. But how?"

"I suggest you try moving in different directions."

"Okay," said the man, encouraged by the new perspective. "That makes sense. But, how? How do I move in a different direction?"

"If you are facing a wall, you will need to go backward, to the right, or to the left."

"Hmm. But how do I do that? How do I proceed?"

"You simply must go one way or another."

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"Right. But, look there's a numbness about everything. I look out the window, the sun is shining, the tree leaves are waving in a light breeze. All I feel is ... numb. Nothing."

"Okay. Then you should go beyond the window, go into the sunshine, and touch the leaves and the light breeze."

"Huh..." The man pondered what the voice might have meant.

Then came, "Your session will expire in one minute. If you would like your session to proceed, simply click the "Proceed" option on screen. You will be scheduled for an additional fifteen minutes for the extra fee of \$45.00."

"Look," said the man in a near panic, "you gotta tell me how to proceed."

"Okay. That's easy. Simply click the "Proceed" option on your screen. We have your credit card on file. Simply click the —"

The voice suddenly stopped. A light on screen blinked at the man. The session had ended.

The man said nothing. He was fuming. But he said nothing. A full fifty minutes of talk had led nowhere, other than shorting him a tidy sum.

The man turned off the screen. He turned off the lights. He remained at the kitchen table, his head bent forward in his hands, a few more cans of beer collecting over the remaining night. Until he came to a realization, perhaps a significant breakthrough, little thanks to the therapy session. Perhaps he did have an issue with anger. Perhaps he had not let himself feel angry about the death of his white spring meadow flower.

He stewed in his anger for quite some time, even once or twice pounding his fist on the kitchen table, rattling things about. And he eventually recalled something of the canned advice the therapist had doled out, repeatedly: all human feelings are valid. Legitimate. Acceptable.

Eventually, late in the evening, the man fell asleep.

When he awoke, he awoke with a heavy feeling of sadness. Which is to say, he awoke feeling a little bit lighter. And a little less numb.