

THE COLLEGE SHRINK

By

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1. Life

Let's face it, there are good people in this world and not so good people. The special ones who we can count on whenever we might need help, and those we instinctively run away from as fast as we can.

Then there are the lion's share of people we come across who are not quite either. Many because they are too afraid to do what they know is right. Like people who believe that global warming is a major concern, but continue to purchase big fossil fuel swilling cars because their neighbors have one. Or people who aren't bigots, but don't say boo when someone makes a xenophobic comment right in front of them. And, of course, those who freely spread falsehoods to hide whatever shameful deeds they or their colleagues may have perpetrated. Like most Republicans in Congress during the Trump administration. Or billionaires paying no taxes.

She had spent her entire life trying to be one of the good ones. Trying to make a difference. As a daughter, student, spouse, mother, friend, citizen. Employee, church goer, PTA member, workout partner, lover. Basically, she was the caretaker for anyone who needed caretaking.

Life is hard. Too hard for many of us to navigate alone. That's why we sometimes need to reach out to someone like her to help us figure it all out. To keep pointing us in the right direction. The problem is that when someone dedicates her whole life to such a noble pursuit, and there is no doubt her pursuit was noble, and ends straying in a way she had never expected she would, it can be catastrophic.

By the end of this story, you likely won't have remembered this forewarning. Because you will have gotten caught up in the people that you meet and their divergent, sometimes amusing lives. All people who needed a caretaker, including the caretaker herself. But you will be better prepared for what's to come if you actually don't forget.

2. The Good Person

In 1975, the year she was born, the year President Ford survived two assassination attempts, the year Jimmy Hoffa disappeared, the year Saturday Night Live premiered, the year the Pet Rock and the Rubik's Cube were introduced, the year Microsoft was founded, the year the Vietnam War officially ended and Patty Hearst was arrested, the year nine new countries gained independence while the Boston Red Sox almost won their first World Series since 1918, the year the disposable razor was originally sold, the year the first woman reached the summit of Mount Everest and Lee Elder became the first black golfer to play in the Masters, the year Moe and Larry of The Three Stooges died, Emily was the 239th most popular female name in the country.

That's how her mind worked, drifting between the notable and the obtuse. Over the past decade, Emily has become the country's eighth most popular girl's name. Right behind Abigail and ahead of Charlotte. Our Emily currently had eleven clients that shared her name. And given the name's popularity and the growing demand for her services, the odds were that she would meet more Emily's this year doing what she does.

Your views of Emily are likely to oscillate during this story. She is attractive in the way that former athletes, which she is, are often attractive. Fit and firm and still with visible muscles, even into her forties and while mostly sitting at a desk ten hours a day. Not to mention having given birth to two children. Her shoulder length blonde hair remains natural in its color, thanks to her family's Scandinavian roots, and her magnetic blue eyes are nothing if not memorable. Though she has added a few pounds in the years since she last competed, she remains strong from taking up rowing on a once dead urban river that has begun to come back to life, unfolding through an old New Jersey manufacturing city near where she lives. A river whose story, in some ways, might be considered to mirror her own. Winding, unpredictable, and recovering. In her little single scull each morning before most of the city is awake, she will first drown herself in perspiration while pounding the river with her oars until her muscles burn past the point of acceptable pain, and then tranquilly rest in the middle of the water watching the other rowers, the multihued birds, and the city, as it ultimately begins to stir. For three seasons each year, it is part of her incessant quest to both stay trim and to get all of her anxieties assembled into some kind of coherent order. Her looks and her morning routine, though, have little to do with the story.

The long hours she works are at a prominent university where she also received her undergraduate, her masters, and her doctoral degrees – not having gone very far since first arriving here when she was eighteen. Her office, home away from home for a person so spectacularly devoted to her work, is in a six-story gothic building in the heart of the campus. It was an office of the type that was given to people who weren't deemed to be essential to the university. A tiny room with a window overlooking a parking lot and just enough space to be occupied by a tired wooden desk, three metal cabinets, two threadbare armchairs that were beyond old, and a standing plant that was as exhausted as the armchairs. It was both utilitarian and dispiriting, but, as mentioned, it had been her home away from home for as long as she had been working here. As we meet our Emily, she is straightening the file folders that now included her handwritten notes from the day, tapping the ends on her desk so that the papers inside all

lined up, and safely returning each to the metal cabinets in the corner of her crappy little office. She locks the cabinets, drops the key in her bag, and turns off the desk lamp as she always does, before finally closing and locking the door behind her. All her clients' information private and secure as it was supposed to be.

Her department had been empty of her co-workers for two hours, if not longer. She saw eight clients each day, the same as everyone else. Clients who remained young while she gradually grew older. Somehow, she could never get everything done that needed to get done by the accustomed quitting time. She liked to think that it was because she cared more than her colleagues did and spent more time thinking about her clients' many issues. Issues she had assumed a responsibility to help them confront.

She wasn't in this business for the money. That was something she'd grown comfortable with when she first started pursuing all of her degrees -- although a little more than the subsistence wages the university was paying her might have been nice. And so she continued to work long days, with no chance of ever being rich, trying to make a difference. But with each year, that mission, as you will witness, seemed to consume more and more of her own life. Something which she would have advised her clients, if they were in her shoes, wasn't particularly healthy.

The world of elite colleges, the only world she had ever worked in, was hardly recognizable from her days as a student. Back when the applications were handwritten or typed. When the school catalog was printed on glossy paper and was mailed to prospective students. When kids wrote their own applications without the help of any paid consultants. Where she once hitchhiked the entire three hour trip from her home to the campus for an interview as a senior in high school because her family's lone car, an old station wagon with the fake wood paneling on the sides, was being used to take her only brother to a swim meet. Back when hitchhiking was still legal.

In today's world, it is a non-stop competition amongst the best colleges for the most qualified students. The best colleges tear down buildings, including some that had been new when she was an undergraduate, to build newer architectural pinnacles that really have nothing to do with the quality of the education (but they do look good on tours of the grounds). They offer a myriad of orientation options to ease new freshmen to campus (even though none of the options are on campus). Better food (all day breakfast, comfort foods, dairy free, vegetarian, vegan, Asian, Mexican, Mongolian barbecue), options for students to invent their own academic majors (Aesthetics in Television?), and a greater choice of semesters away. Once upon a time, being away from home and on campus was considered a semester away. Classes start later in the morning so the students can get enough sleep. Exams are now in the evening to avoid the all-nighters studying. The students now only pull all-nighters to party, if they are so motivated. And there are more days off to relax, perhaps to rest up from the all-night partying. All to attract the best and the brightest.

Fewer than eight percent who apply are admitted, which no one could have envisioned when the university was founded not long before the Revolutionary War began. Unless their parents donate one of the new buildings, or perhaps try the cheating scandal route of fake

student-athletes and bribed coaches, there is no longer the inevitable acceptance for anyone, not even for legacy applicants. The numbers just didn't work given the huge number of alumni, the small number of spaces available, and the school's never satiated desire for diversity. Wealthy alums never comprehend why their uber talented child – Oliver or Caleb or Amelia -- hadn't been selected amongst all of the uber talented applicants. You had a better chance if you were a kid applying from some little third world country that would look especially good on the school website. Sandesh or Chantou. All of the student's had amazing grades and unimaginable test scores. Not to mention calendars filled with unbelievably impressive extracurricular activities. Some of which were probably even legitimate. Future leaders of our world, no doubt.

And yet here Emily was, the first day the newest of the best and the brightest arrived on campus to launch their academic experience. The beginning of four years of experimenting with who they were. It was the moment their parents had been both hoping for and stressing about since their child entered grade school. And the slots on her own calendar for first time clients were already almost completely booked for the next six weeks. The best and the brightest were never asked about any mental health issues on their applications, as healthcare privacy rules applied to college applications, too. So the newly accepted students emailed, or more likely their parents called, a month before school started to schedule an appointment with one of the therapists. It had been this way for long time, but it was getting worse as the students' issues grew and the parents' expectations grew.

In earlier years, going home each night, as she was now, was her favorite part of the day. Not because she hated her job. She didn't. But the warmth of entering their tiny little house on a street of tiny little houses was an experience that was hard to replicate. And she got to experience it night after night. The girls, both of them, would be so thrilled when she walked through the front door, ready with big hugs and big stories of their uncomplicated little days. Day care circle time, nursery school sponge painting, and after school play dates in elementary school. The magic of little ones gaining new talents and making friends for the first time. Experiences that were now all such happy memories. There would never be a better feeling in her life than the cuddles from those four pint-sized arms her first few minutes home. Two very different little people, even though they were twins, who were best friends back then and still best friends today. She couldn't imagine ever loving two people as much as she loved them.

He was a teacher and his days ended much earlier, and he would have dinner well on its way by the time she came through the front door. If nothing else, he was a good cook, which she was not, who liked to cook, which she did not. He seemed, back then, to be happy to see her, too. A little kiss or hug. The subtle electricity of brushing arms as they set the table together. Hands gently swiping after the meal as one of them handed over a cleaned dish to the other to be dried. The little shoulder rub while the girls were getting ready for bed. She had always loved it however he touched her. It made her feel at peace no matter what was going on in her work, or for that matter, any part of her life. Their smiles radiated contentment. Like they were in a good place together, the four of them, building something extraordinary together. She, of course, read all the books about marriage and about parenting, as she didn't want to make any mistakes. Then she would give the books to him, so he could at least feign reading them.

But things change. She did make mistakes. He made mistakes. A few years from now, he will be embarking on his third marriage while she will still be recovering from the first. Not that anyone had ever said it to her directly, but she knew that her closest friends, the ones who had been invited to the small wedding that was all that they could afford, all quietly questioned why she had decided to marry him. She was driven by her work and later, it was clear, would be all about her kids. It was never quite clear what he was driven by. She had her PhD and was called ‘Doctor’ by her clients. He was mostly a faux intellect with a bachelor’s degree in history, who regularly wrote occasionally published letters to the editor of the local newspaper. A slight build – she weighed as much he did – and an always neatly trimmed beard with gold wire framed glasses gave him a sort of nerdish cute look. If that is actually a category of men’s looks. He tried to project the image of a college professor, but was only a high school teacher who, after so many years at the same school, was never even a department head. Though he did teach at a well-regarded hundred year old prep school where tuition cost over thirty thousand dollars a year for what they call the upper school. And because it was free for the children of faculty, her girls had gone there since kindergarten.

Emily was fairly certain she had loved him when they first married and that her love grew as their relationship matured. And while she occasionally, or perhaps more than occasionally, chided him for not paying attention to what was going on around him, she certainly hadn’t been unhappy at any point during their life together. But now it was difficult to figure out what her feelings for him had been. It’s what she thought about the most when she sat in her scull in the middle of the river early each morning. It’s funny, or maybe not so funny depending upon how one looked at it, that she gave regular advice to her clients about relationships. A topic, it turns out, she really may not have known all that much about.

A few times before him, she assumed she had been in love, or at least in like. In high school, she was president of her little class and captain of three sports. Not to mention the class valedictorian. Very much the big fish in a small Pennsylvania high school that had only eighty kids in a grade. She dated a number of the boys. There was one she liked the most, and could have seen herself having a long relationship with. The first one, as a naïve young girl, she ever had an inkling of spending her life with. Mostly cliched dreams that allowed her to fall asleep at night with a smile on her face. But he was Jewish, and his mother was Jewish, and Emily wasn’t. They dated and did things when his mother wasn’t looking, which wasn’t very often. Dating the boy and his mother simultaneously was unfortunately never going to work.

College was different. It was far larger than her little high school. In addition to studying and playing field hockey, she had various campus jobs to help pay her expenses. Still, she found enough freedom to explore and figure out who she was. Initially, she welcomed the greater number of boys than her high school had to offer, and she was happy to flirt with a few of them when the mood struck her. While she wasn’t beautiful, in her mind she was attractive enough, as had been described, and so she had choices. But one boy she thought she might like went too far and tried to assault her after a campus party. Something she rarely spoke about, but would never forget. Probably she had consumed too much beer and that had made her do stupid things. Still, it was both frightening and wrong. Only she seemed to be the lone person back then who saw it that way.

After college, Emily fell in love with psychology. That was her only other romance before him. She had been determined to build a career, continuing to ignore boys as she had since being attacked, while she got her masters, wrote her dissertation, which took her forever to get right, and then her PhD. Until he entered the picture by surprise. They were introduced by a friend of a friend, and she found that she really liked being with him. He was four years older than she was, and settled into his teaching career, but he appeared to like her as much as she liked him. There seemed to be an even balance in the relationship. He was gentle with her and made her feel comfortable. But that was then. The balance didn't last. His interest waned long before she ever recognized. Hers continues for a still undetermined period, even though he left. She had never considered love to be disposable.

Now she lives alone in the same tiny little house with a mortgage that she really can't afford. The house isn't even in the town where the university is, but rather in a residential section of Trenton, where everything is cheaper for a reason. There are a handful of famous people who were born in Trenton. Supreme Court Justices Antonin Scalia and Samuel Alito, former New York mayor David Dinkins, comedian Ernie Kovacs, the eccentric basketball player Dennis Rodman, and many actors who you might recognize though not really know who they are. But mostly it's a place that when people leave, they don't return.

She'd gotten a second mortgage and bought his half of the house when they split, and, in retrospect, paid him more than she should have. But, at the time, she wanted the girls to have some constancy in their lives. And, at the time, she thought that she would be getting a regular child support check from him. To save money, she kept the heat so low that it made you afraid to get out of bed in the morning when the weather was cool. And she never replaced the furniture he took with him, but rather spread around what remained to make her home look like it was still appropriately furnished. She should sell the house and rent an apartment that she could better afford and fully furnish, but she didn't have the energy to go through that process. Maybe she secretly feared the embarrassment of no one wanting to buy the home where she had worked so hard to create a family. That might well have been too painful a gut punch for her to take right now.

The girls were growing up and now off assembling their own lives, one starting college in Chicago and one in California. Their first time ever apart from one another. She talked to each of them regularly. Usually they would call when they were walking somewhere – the gym, dinner, the library, to see a friend. Still loving them as much as anyone could ever love two people, but very much missing their presence. Those calls returned to her the little bit of sanity that she needed in her life. And they made her laugh. Even if it was only for a few minutes a night, before they had to go off and do whatever.

So now she would go home to her newly cold, empty house, many of her now solo evenings spent trying to balance the checkbook, without ever having much luck. Which only added to her mounting mental exhaustion. She headed for the parking lot, as she had done literally thousands of times over her almost two decades working here, to her little car that had more miles on it than a car was meant to have. This is what she signed up for when she decided to be a good person. The fulfillment of being the universal caretaker.

Nonetheless, it didn't mean that life didn't suck sometimes.

3. The Other Break Up

There was a whole other story about Jelly before this one. One about her and a boy and a school and about growing up, but in a way that was both heartwarming and frustrating, and certainly less predictable than what would have been expected. But that is for another time and place. You will like her because she is her own person. She is unique in how she talks, dresses, and acts. She is perceptive and smart in a way that we all wish we were perceptive and smart. She is outwardly independent and confident, even though she can be as anxious and unsure of herself as we are. But it is hard to tell. Nobody ever sees that side of her. It is also hard to take our eyes off of her because in so many ways we wish we were more like her. She was this way in high school, and is even more so in college.

When a person as capricious as Jelly arrives in an entirely unfamiliar environment, you can never be quite sure what is going to happen. It can be like experimenting with mixing different chemical compounds together. You might discover the cure for some uncommon disease. Or you might blow up the building you are working in. She was new to the university, and the university was new to her. But there was no mistaking when she arrived.

“Hello. I’m Doctor Metcalf.”

Jelly had streaks of green across her light brown hair, and too many earrings to count. Wearing a blouse and shorts that both appeared a few sizes too big for her, as likely to have been purchased for several dollars from a Salvation Army as anywhere else, and carrying a huge unzipped bag over her shoulder that seemed it might hold everything she owned. Like one could find a baseball mitt or an espresso machine if they looked hard enough. A sort of homeless chic. She was eye-catching in a way that required no expensive cosmetics, which she didn’t wear, or designer clothes, which she didn’t own.

The university was an amazing collection of students. The natural school government leader who already had a closet full of suits and seemed someday destined to be elected to Congress, the ripped jock who would single-handedly change the school’s athletic fortunes, the nerdy kid with the unending collection of Star Wars t-shirts primed to invent the next famous thing that no one knew needed to be invented. The first college-bound kid in a family that had no money, but who did his or her best to hide that from peers. The absurdly wealthy kid with a widely recognized brand for a surname who would need neither a job nor money at any time in life, but, on occasion, pretended to be scratching nickels together in order to feel better about his or her incredible good fortune. The students who called home three times each night to see what was for dinner, then to see how the dinner was, and then to say goodnight. The students whose parents had three homes but never called any of them. Black skin, brown skin, blue hair, no hair. Lots of earrings, a few nose rings, a couple of silver balls on tongues. Alcohol, drugs, sex. Mormon, Muslim, Russian, Sri Lankan. Smart and lots of time spent studying the common threads. She seemed nothing like any of them.

“Hi Doc!”

Nobody was ever happy when they first went to see their therapist. Nobody had an exclamation point at the end of their greeting. She bumped fists with Emily and then flopped into one of the tired armchairs, as if she been there a hundred times before.

Almost a quarter of the students at the university now saw a therapist during an academic year. The school had previously limited the number of sessions to seven, enough, they presumed, to help kids figure out whatever they might be wrestling with. In days gone by that had been plenty. In more recent years, more often than not, seven visits wasn't even close to being enough. Not even in the ballpark. As a result of the increasing needs, there was no longer any limit to the sessions. The counseling office was no longer a place to offer a simple advice to confused students, but rather had become a destination to treat kids with serious mental health issues. But it was a growing challenge for therapists to give the students the time that they needed. Particularly when the university doesn't add any new therapists to the department. The one with a collection of small offices with furniture fatigue and lifeless plants. What the university sold and what it delivered were not always the same thing.

"I didn't know that you were bringing a friend with you today, Angela."

He was huge, and he slowly lumbered across her office until coming to rest on the sill of the window that looked out over the parking lot. Maybe 6'6" and well over three hundred pounds, but chiseled, with hands and feet that were of a size that was hard to even describe. Bigger than whatever you are picturing. And he had a bewildered look, because, Emily could tell, nobody had yet told him why he was here.

"This is Seth."

"Hello, Seth."

He had a mane of long black hair, three days of a beard, and dressed like someone who didn't spend much time thinking about what to wear. Exhausted jeans, a generic short-sleeved, buttoned down plaid shirt, and work boots that appeared old and worn from a great deal of physical activity. Again, his whole body was on a different scale.

"Hi," he grumbled.

It was apparent from the outset that she was his Emma Bovary, and he was her Charles. You may have to look that one up, but on fancy college campuses with ungodly tuitions and all the perks mentioned previously, this is the type of thing that is studied. Novels that were written in the 1850's. This is what some professor in another building on campus, with a nicer office with newer chairs and flourishing plants, spends a career lecturing about to his or her students. A university is proud of its professors and welcomes the chance to show them off. On the contrary, they are happy to hide the therapists, not wanting to admit that their students have issues. *A liberal arts education teaches our students how to think.* But *Madame Bovary*? Yet somehow most of these students seemed to find jobs upon graduation that quickly paid them more than she would ever make, even though they studied fiction written in the 19th century while she had her PhD in a science.

“So tell me, where are you guys from?”

“I was born in Philadelphia, but moved to Chicago this summer after my parent’s split up. Have always been a city girl. Seth is from a little town in Iowa.”

Hence his outfit. Elite universities always want a kid or two from the less populated places like Iowa, so they can boast that they have students from all fifty states, in addition to the countries where Sandesh and Chantou were raised. It wasn’t easy competing for the smartest kids in Iowa. North and South Dakota were even more of a challenge.

“I’m sorry to hear about your parents.”

“It was brewing for a number of years.”

“That can’t have been much fun. How are you coping with all that?”

“For another time.”

“Okay.” Emily paused and made a note on the yellow legal pad that was always in front of her when she worked. “So then, how can I help you, Angela?”

Most of the students who came to Emily’s office for the first time fidgeted and looked at their feet or her feet or the diplomas on her wall in the office or the pictures of her daughters on her desk. The young girl looked right at her with incredibly alive eyes. Eyes that made you want to keep looking at them or even through them to see what was inside. The eyes of someone who was either going to do something great in her life or flame out in a dramatic way. After getting to know her over the coming year, which is roughly the length of this story, and better than Emily knew any of her other clients, it would still be unclear which would be her destiny.

“Seth and I having been dating for a while. I brought him here because I want to break up.”

Seth didn’t react, because he didn’t know how to react. With either of them. He just continued to sit silently on the window sill, casting a huge shadow that blanketed most of the floor and far wall of the tiny office. Dampening the spirits in the room, much as his demeanor would also soon do.

“You two are freshmen, right?” Emily asked while adding to her notes on the legal pad. Not that she ever needed the help remembering. She had a steel trap. But she liked appearing engaged when she was with clients, so they were convinced she was serious about her work. Which she was.

“Yup.” The girl would do all the talking at first.

“And this is your first full day on campus?”

“It is for me. Seth has been here for two weeks for football practice.”

“Well, breaking up the first day here is certainly a new twist. I can honestly say that I’ve never encountered this before. Did Seth know that this is what you were planning to do?” inquired Emily.

“No. Well, not until right now.”

“So why am I part of the equation, Angela?” Emily continued.

“By the way, you can call me Jelly. Everyone I know seems to.”

“Like the opposite of peanut butter?”

She laughed in a very appealing way. A contagious laugh. It wasn’t a surprise that a boy like Seth would want to be with her. Given the way she dressed, there wasn’t much left to anybody’s imagination.

“I have heard that once before, when someone in high school and I first met,” Jelly responded. “Anyway, I thought that Seth might be hurt. Or be angry with me. Or both.”

“Does Seth get angry with you?”

“Sometimes. Mostly when I don’t see things the way he does. Which is most of the time.”

“And you are also afraid he would be hurt?”

“Yes.”

“Are you afraid he might hurt himself or hurt you?”

It was a hard thing to fathom, but break ups, at any age, carry with them the risk of violence. Emily was taught this way back in grad school, and it’s something you don’t readily forget. It’s a scary side of the human psyche. One of the many.

“He won’t hurt me. He is too gentle for that.”

She reached over and patted him on the thigh. Emily guessed that the giant liked being stroked by Jelly. Although the gesture may have added to his confusion given that she was dumping him. Jelly, it turns out, was quite skilled at such misdirection.

Emily had seen this same situation more and more in recent years. As mobile phone use grew, so did the frequency of student couples coming to see therapists to break up. One, they hadn’t yet learned how to communicate. Texting photos is really not communicating. Two, it

only took a few swipes to find a new romantic interest. And because they'd had sex before they knew each other's middle names, their connection usually had little substance to it. The thing that made them feel good didn't last. These two were only eighteen or nineteen at this point. It was a familiar story, but, unfortunately, not a particularly healthy one.

"Seth, what do you have to say about this?" Emily continued to probe.

"Fuck."

That was what got them here, but Emily wouldn't comment on that just yet.

"How long have the two of you been dating?" she continued.

"About three months," responded Jelly.

Seth, like most new clients, had been looking down at his shoes the entire time.

"Seth, did you ever date anyone before you got here?"

"There were twenty-five girls in my high school class," he responded, still peering at his worn shoes, perhaps hoping for some insight from them into what was actually happening here. "I've dated pretty much all of them."

"How about you Jelly?" Emily asked.

"That's a story for another session, too," she responded to the doctor.

"If you say so. So how did you meet each other, given that this is your first day here together and one of you is from Iowa and one from Illinois?"

"There is a chat site for incoming freshmen," Jelly filled her in. "We met on the site, and then we got together -- the first time in Chicago. After that we began to take the train back and forth."

"So you saw each other over the summer?"

"A fair amount actually," Jelly continued. "It's an easy train ride. And his family is hilarious. I milked my first cow while his father and brothers were cheering me on. Foreplay with a cow."

"Sounds like fun. I guess, anyway. Can't say that I've ever done that. And given how you describe it, I now probably never will." Emily watched as Jelly had turned toward Seth to see how he was accepting the conversation. Like she was training a new puppy. An extremely large new puppy. "And yet, Jelly, you want to break up after your time with his family and the cow?"

“It is clear that Seth and I aren’t a great match. I met somebody else.”

“Your first day on campus, Jelly?”

Emily’s job was to keep asking questions and then listen until she was able to paint a more complete picture of the problem. The diagnostic was the part of her job that she liked best. It was a little like playing detective. But, as said previously, this couple’s problem was not unusual on today’s college campuses.

“I work quickly.”

“Shit.” Seth seemed to prefer the monosyllabic responses.

Jelly wasn’t being truthful, and Emily knew it. There are enough activities to keep students occupied on campus the first day such that finding a new boyfriend isn’t going to be one of them. After all, it was just after lunch. Moreover, Jelly had made the appointment well before she arrived to school.

Emily continued on her task.

“What was the connection for the two of you?”

“What do you mean?” Jelly replied.

“What did you do when you were together. Just the two of you. When you weren’t building your farming skills?”

“Mostly we had sex.”

Bingo.

“Did you guys ever spend time talking?”

“Mostly when we were having sex,” Jelly continued. “We were both new at it, and we giggled a bunch because we didn’t really know what the hell we were doing.”

“I see. So Seth, how do you feel about all of this? Do you want to break up?”

“No.”

“Why not? And see if you can help me out by using a few more words in your answers.”

“Look, I like Jelly. Not to mention that I like having sex, too. With her.”

“Can you tell the difference? Between love and sex?”

He didn't respond.

"What, Seth, did you think was going to happen in the long run with your relationship with Jelly? Did you ever think about that?"

Emily needed to get him engaged in the conversation, so she could gauge for herself how likely he was to hurt anybody. Again, in college, this happens more than anyone would hope. And it is rarely a good outcome. This is what she was most worried about with these two. Given his enormity, he could potentially do some genuine physical damage without ever intending it.

"Not really."

"Did you think that we were going to get married?" Jelly jumped in where she shouldn't have.

"I don't think very far ahead, Jelly. Tomorrow is a long way away in my world."

"So if there is no long term together, why would breaking up bother you?" The young woman followed up, impatient with her new therapist.

"I just like you. You're different than everyone I've ever met." He may not have been wrong about that. "And it's something to do besides playing football and studying."

The therapist had heard this before, too. A whole campus of opportunities, but once the students had experienced sex, they couldn't think of anything else to do. Really that was mostly the boys. Boys have a way of confusing love and sex. Actually, men in general often did. Maybe even her husband. For the girls it tended to be different. They tended to have sex to keep the boys, until they didn't want them anymore.

Jelly squirmed in the tired chair, likely not sure she was comfortable with the fact that Seth was as attracted to her as much as he was.

"Do you like playing football?" Emily took the lead once more.

"It's okay. It's a whole lot more serious here than it was in high school."

"How so?"

"It takes a bunch more time. Required weightlifting until our shoulders and legs are on fire, visits to the trainers, film sessions that are far too intensive, longer practices, team meals. Way more coaches, and they all scream all the time. We don't laugh and goof around as much."

"I'm sorry to hear that, because I know it's a big investment of your time. So let me ask you this, Seth. How do you feel towards Jelly right now?"

"Not as great as I did ten minutes ago," he replied.

“Do you feel like you want to hurt her?”

“I wouldn’t ever do that.”

“Do you feel you would want to hurt yourself?”

Once more, he didn’t answer.

She turned to Jelly, as she was, in theory, the client. She had scheduled the appointment.

“Jelly, give me your perspective. Why are you worried about Seth?”

“Seth is a living irony.”

“You’ll have to explain to me what that means.”

“He wants to have a girlfriend more than anything. He is really intense about it. But when he actually gets the girlfriend he wants – in this case me – he doesn’t want to invest the effort in the relationship. It’s like he just wants someone to be with him. To help him make sure he is doing all the things he is supposed to be doing. Like Mary Poppins or something. He’s actually my first real boyfriend – beyond a prom date that didn’t end particularly well – but he has a clear picture of what he wants, which is different from what I want. I don’t want to be Mary Poppins. I just want a best friend. Seth has had lots of girlfriends before, and I get the sense that they have all ended badly. Some really badly.”

“Is this accurate Seth?”

“She makes it sound worse than it was.”

“Did they break up with you or you with them?”

“Some of each.”

“How many times did you end up in a therapist’s office?”

That caused him to look up for the first time. Surprised by her question.

“Why do you think that?”

“I’ve been doing this a long time. Sometimes I can just tell.” Really, she was just guessing. But that’s what you have to do on occasion.

He hesitated before responding, likely trying to figure out whether to come clean or not. New clients are not always the most forthcoming.

“More times than I can count.”

“Did you ever hurt yourself after a breakup?”

“This really isn’t any of your business, but I have had a few moments that I am not proud of.”

“I see. Did you ever share any of this with Jelly?”

“Not until now.”

This was Emily’s job. This is what she signed up for. And she liked it, so long as no one was going to get physically hurt. Which, she had sadly learned through experience, she can’t always influence. She would worry about Seth. And worry for Jelly.