

Freud

Would Understand

BY DEXTER JEFFRIES

This is pathetic but true: The longest-running relationship I've ever had with a woman who is not my mother has been with my therapist. My history is a disgruntled litany of marriage, divorce, intertwining and overlapping relationships — some for a year; others for two years, four months, 37 days — all linked by 21 years of contact with the woman I love most.

When did this epiphany come to me? It struck at about 10:42 A.M. while I was sitting opposite my California girl — my therapist, Monica. Looking around her apartment at the Buddhist bells and gongs, half-listening to her say things about the importance of my relationship with my mother when I was a kid, I said to myself: "Damn, I've known Monica for twenty years. Twenty-one years. Jesus, is that possible?"

In 1985 my wife at the time and I brought our son to Monica on the recommendation of that overly pompous and sacrosanct private school in Brooklyn Heights, St. Ann's. A

teacher or administrator suggested therapy because James wasn't doing so well in their unstructured and pretentious learning habitat. I had always questioned the efficacy of this pedagogic experiment, but dutifully brought him to therapy every Wednesday nonetheless, and then I waited around for an hour. That was my initial contact with Monica. Like all my relationships, it was love at

fourteenth or fifteenth sight.

She had freckles, and I found that cute. She was from California, Big Sur country. California girls were just as the Beach Boys had described them, I thought, the way all girls should be. I looked at her golden brown sandaled feet, broad shoulders with blond hair gracing them if she leaned the right way, and remarked: "Man, finally made it. Got my California

girl in New York at last." When she started to see my son, it had been a score of years since the halcyon days of Haight Asbury and me driving down Pacific Coast Highway Number 1 back in the early 70s. Little did I know Monica had been there too, getting nice and tan.

When I first met her, Monica was pleasingly chunky; now she's small. I used to be chunky too. Now I'm



small. That's one mutual change that has occurred within both of us. I don't know how or why she changed, but I find it a bit odd to be a shadow of my former physical self. I told her it made me feel weird. She said it made her feel healthy. Well, Monica, you're a therapist, you should know.

James did benefit from seeing Monica. Telling us that it was important for her to speak with us, his parents, she gave us monthly reports on his progress, for which Elizabeth and I were always grateful. Monica's concern and love for our son were so genuine that I would almost cry when she spoke about how hard he was struggling to earn his place in this world, and to make sense of all the craziness he had encountered by the tender age of 6.

Years later, Monica intervened on our behalf when Liz and I were experiencing marital strife. She almost saved our marriage. She did her darndest. Just wasn't in the cards.

I continued to see her after the divorce and always found it comforting since she could talk about the two most important people in my life that were no longer with me, my wife and my son. I would see her for a few months, then take a break, then see her again. I asked her during one stretch of "rehab" and retooling if it was okay to come in for a "tune-up" every now and then. She said: "Sure, it's always good to see you." I would

drop in as life dropped on me.

Monica and I became a couple. We've had our breakups, disagreements, petty jealousies, and every few years, bad advice from her to me. When I reminded her of those few times, she sat up in her seat, perturbed, and reproached me with incontrovertible evidence of my hard-headedness: "I told you that if you were going to date a woman like that, there would be serious trust issues. Do you remember me saying that about Lorraine?"

She's got wrinkles now, on her neck. I just noticed them. Guess she's getting old, but I'm not exactly Brad Pitt myself. We don't have sex and never have, but when you're in your 50s, who does? AARP people do it once a month. To miss out on something that other people are getting only a dozen times a year hardly seems worth the risk. The whole relationship would be ruined if, after 20 years, we were to push that envelope. We love each other, that's what counts. Some of you will say it's not real. When I lost my wife, Monica was there for me. When I lost my mind, Monica was there for me. There.

What have I done for her? Plenty. She looked at me once and confessed: "You know, you're the only black client I've ever had. Do you know that? Do you think that's strange? I mean, within the profession, this is a topic

that's always on the table for discussion. Is therapy somehow intrinsically estranging to African-Americans?" I laughed. "Monica, Black people are either too crazy or too smart to go to therapy. I don't know which. They're nuts, just not this kind of sitting around in an office with little bells and air machines going off nuts."

Because I teach young people, I also keep her abreast of social and cultural trends, drugs and fads that Generation X, Y, Z, or Q cultivate and find intriguing. That's definitely a plus, and she's thanked me. Reciprocating, she looks out for me. Anytime I start dating someone new she warns me about her, and I take her advice. Some of my new female possibilities try to convince me that Monica loves me, and she's keeping me for herself. I laugh and wave my hand and utter an exhausted: "Puhlease! She's just trying to protect me from the side of you that you don't know about."

I guard and protect her too. On occasion she's mentioned a potential boyfriend, and I've given her a few words of caution.

Another therapist? No. Verboten. NO.

Met on a couples ski weekend? No! I told you not to go on those things. Those are for desperate people. You're intelligent and beautiful. Come on.

Ticket line at the Film Forum for

The Battle of Algiers? No. Absolutely not. You know the kind of men that go to the Film Forum. Psychological terrorists, and impotent to boot.

Computer match.com? Honey, no, no way. Come on. You've gotta meet a nice normal guy. The computer? That's for alienated people. Are you serious? Those people come straight out of Dostoyevsky, damn, *Notes From the Underground*. They're a mess. No way.

"Honey" makes her smile sometimes; other times she tightens up and cautions me about the therapist-client relationship.

We have our problems – don't get me wrong. The other day I was ready to kick her in her foot. Sitting there, smug, confident, telling me what I had to do. What I had to work on. What I had to explore. How my honest side still needed cultivating. Then had the nerve to ask me why I was mad. But she's a good ol' California gal, and after 21 years of a loving relationship, I'm not kicking anybody.

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