

THE THERAPIST

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In his years as a therapist, Robert, an unsure and lonely man in his private life, believed he was uniquely capable of accessing a deep core within his patients in just a few short sessions. Like a metal detector finding a tiny screw, he homed in on their central issue with little to go on. His client retention record was a solid 78%, owing, he thought, to his singular ability to unearth the depths of their fears and traumas and provide them practical methods for relief and growth. Never mind that he relied on the same five or six tired exercises he rotated between clients depending on the situation. One would never describe Robert's therapy as bespoke, tailored, or individualized. Still, he possessed no lack of confidence in his cookie cutter brand of analysis.

He awaited Matthew, his first client of the day. A large, frustrated man, Matthew had been coming to Robert for advice since his wife had filed for divorce some seven months earlier. Lately, the man had been expressing a wish to end his wife's life. As a therapist, Robert was duty bound to report to authorities any of his patient's threats of harm, to someone else or themselves. However, by the time Matthew's appointment was over and Robert was scribbling notes about the session, the therapist felt silly at the thought of calling the police.

Robert knew better. Men hated their wives, wives hated their mothers-in-law, children hated their parents and parents wished they'd never had children and dreamed of what life would be like without that soul-sucking responsibility. They wanted to kill them, they said. Murderous fantasies occupied their waking hours. They Googled methods of murder that were undetectable by routine investigations. An overdose of insulin, for example. Robert had heard about that nurse who killed several elderly patients with insulin injections. Her crimes only came to light after she confessed to mental health professionals who reported her to authorities.

Matthew wasn't a killer, Robert thought, but didn't write in his notes.

Robert offered a sympathetic ear and a light psychological touch that amounted to an echo chamber to the ordinary person blowing off typical stress in a safe space. If he could gently guide them away from blaming someone else for their life's problems, even better. When the most ambitious among them discovered they couldn't acquire insulin or realized how difficult it was to extract ricin from castor beans and then somehow manage to get enough of the poison into someone else's system, they moved on. The murder fantasy was a common release valve, nothing more. Robert believed it was healthy to talk about it and then to let it go.

Robert was a terrible therapist.

He wriggled into the worn leather easy chair and closed his eyes. As a child, dreaming of his future career and the spoils that came with it, he had pictured this precise scene. Fine leather furnishings in an office whose walls were lined with impressive-looking books on tall shelving. An expensive tweed jacket pulled across his taut belly – thank you squash, three times a week – its elbows patched with swatches of suede. A bottle of single malt scotch and a heavy-bottomed glass in his desk drawer.

Robert's belief in the benign threats of his clients notwithstanding, he found Matthew's recent admissions of violent fantasies mildly disturbing. He began carrying a knife in his jacket pocket although he couldn't picture a scenario where the knife would make the difference between life and death. If he found himself under threat he would need to free the folded knife from his pocket, open it fully, and point the sharp blade toward his attacker. Then there was the issue of thrusting it hard enough to pierce a man's flesh. Robert always felt the hands were more reliable than any weapon. Even so, he chose the knife and put it in his pocket, still unsure whether he could use it to defend himself, even if another man's hands were tightening around his throat. Still, carrying the knife made him feel safer and thoughts of everything that could go wrong while using it were all the evidence he needed that he should not purchase a gun. Not yet anyway.

Matthew had been growing increasingly agitated with each appointment, the opposite direction to a therapist's hopes. Robert could hear him now, already on the other side of the closed door, pacing and muttering. It was five minutes to nine and if nothing else, Robert would adhere to the schedule. He would not be bullied or irritated into allowing the man in early. Breaking rules leads to anarchy.

Robert eased himself out of the chair and tip-toed to his office window. He peered down seven stories to the street below where he drew comfort from watching people go about their day. As long as they were behaving normally, he felt that nothing could go wrong.

A sharp rap on his office door startled him. Matthew, of course. Robert inhaled deeply and exhaled through his mouth. *Time to get to work.*

Matthew charged through the door as Robert opened it and marched straight to the couch where he landed on the cushion like a sandbag. He was at least twice Robert's weight with several inches on the therapist in height, too. Matthew always looked as if he'd just come from a long a run but Robert was quite certain the man didn't take regular walks let alone runs. He was the kind of person who drove two blocks to buy milk. Over the course of a session, his face would alternate between ruddy and grey, depending on his mood. Today, he looked angry and impatient which Robert supposed he was after pacing outside for several minutes.

Robert sighed and took his seat in the hard-backed leather chair he used only when a client was in the room. Seating for therapy is a deliberate strategy to make the patient feel comfortable (a couch with squish, as one of his

colleagues put it) while the therapist appears more formal and upright. It's a subtle nod to the dynamic between therapist and client. *I'll tell you that you're in charge but that's not entirely the case.*

"Thanks a fuck of a lot for making me wait," Matthew spat.

Robert placed his notepad and pen on the table and held up a defensive palm. "Whoa, Matthew, your session was booked for nine. We keep to a schedule around here, alright? I have other patients, other duties and responsibilities."

"Whatever," Matthew replied. "Two minutes early wouldn't kill you."

Robert labored to keep a neutral expression. "May we begin?"

"Whatever," Matthew repeated. Robert picked up his pad and pen and clicked the ballpoint into the ready position. He often took meticulous notes during therapy but he sometimes also tipped the pad toward himself and doodled while they droned on, animals mostly. The dullness of some clients' lives couldn't be overstated.

"Where would you like to – "

"I did it, man. I killed her."

Robert looked up from the pad where he had just written the date and Matthew's name.

"You did what now?"

Matthew hung his head and clasped it with both palms. Was he crying? Robert thought the big man may have broken down.

"Matthew," Robert began softly. "What are you telling me? Who did you kill?"

Matthew raised his head and in doing so, dragged his fingers down the front of his face, tugging on his lower eyelids and pulling his mouth into a clownish shape. "Aaaaaugh!"

"I'm coming to you, Matthew. Don't be alarmed." Robert stood and made his way past the coffee table to the couch where he sat on the center cushion. Matthew was definitely shedding tears. It was agony to witness. Robert tentatively touched a hand to his patient's shoulder.

"Tell me what happened. Please. When you say kill do you mean..."

"I fucking killed her, okay? You know who, my ex-wife. It's all I've been thinking about for weeks and it just seemed like the only way, you know? Alimony payments are killing me. I hardly ever get to see my boys. I live in a

shithole apartment. And it's all because of her. That bitch ruined my life. So I did it. Today. I went to her house when the kids were at school and I just popped her. It was fast. She didn't suffer."

Robert paused to think a moment. It's true, Matthew had told him he was thinking about killing his ex. What was her name? Janine or Janet, something like that. He'd had a one-night stand when she was out of town with the boys visiting relatives and somehow got the bright idea to confess to her expecting forgiveness. Instead, she kicked him out and launched divorce proceedings. He'd started coming to Robert for therapy after his confession and before the divorce was final.

Matthew took the silence as an invitation to continue.

"She wasn't reasonable, you know? She turned cold and hard and did everything she could to ruin my life. So vindictive. I had to get her out of my life, I didn't have a choice, Doc. I had to do it."

"Tell me what happened." Robert rose and returned to his chair, realizing Matthew was in no condition to accept physical acts of support.

Matthew cleared his throat and rubbed both eyes roughly. He slapped his hands on his thighs and said, "Well, I hadn't planned on it, you know? I mean of course I wanted to do it but today? That wasn't in my plans."

He had gone over to his ex's house early to see if a certain guy had spent the night. The boys had recently been talking about an Uncle Mike and Robert figured the ex was seeing someone who was spending a lot of time at his house. He still thought of it as his house because he'd come up with the downpayment and covered the mortgage and bills while she was home with the boys and damn it anyway, he was still paying the mortgage even though he wasn't allowed to live there anymore.

"Sure as shit, I pull up in front of the house and there's a fucking Audi in the driveway. Julianna, she doesn't drive an Audi, you know? So I know it's the guy, this Uncle Mike, my boys are telling me shoots hoops and buys them pizza and shit. Now he's sleeping over in my house, in my bed. Not on my fucking watch. Anyway, I sit in my car a few houses up and I see this guy, he comes out with my boys and their backpacks and everything and the mother fucker is taking them to school. He's playing daddy with my sons and she's waving from the porch and aren't they just the perfect fucking family."

"That made you angry."

"You got that right, Doc. But you know what's worse? It made me sad. That should be me getting into the car in the driveway with my boys in the back and driving them to school. She should be on the porch all smiling in her bathrobe waving at *me*."

“So, I don’t know this guy or nothin’ but I can’t do anything about that now because he’s got my boys in his car, right? I wait for him to pull down the street and give it a couple of beats in case one of the boys says, ‘we have to go back, I forgot my lunch.’ When I figure they’re really gone, I circle around the block behind the house. See, we don’t know nobody there. We used to know the Andersons who lived right behind us. They had a dog that was always jumping our fence and shitting on our grass. They moved away and the new people moved in after I moved out so they don’t know me or my car.

“So, like I say, I park on that street and walk around to my house. One thing I know about Julianna is she don’t lock the front door, like, never. We used to have words about that. I’d tell her to keep it locked and she’d say, ‘if the boys aren’t in the house, that door stays open. I want them getting in easy if they lose their key or whatever. This house is their house and there should be no barrier for them.’ No barrier. She actually said that.

“There’s no one around. I think about it for a minute, Doc, I really do. I take my Ruger out of the glovebox and load it. I’ve got it tucked in my waistband and there’s no question what I’m there to do but I give myself a minute to make sure. But Doc, I don’t see no other way out of this. She’s bleeding me dry and I’m barely keeping my head above water. And now some other guy I don’t know is acting like stepdaddy to my sons. She doesn’t even have the courtesy to tell me about him, introduce us? I don’t think so.

“The door is unlocked, just like I know it will be, and I can hear her singing. She’s fucking singing a happy fucking tune and I hear the water running. She’s in the shower. The only question I have now is, am I going to take her out so she doesn’t know what hit her or do I need to see the fear in her eyes. Have her know it’s me, you know? A final fuck you.

“I decide it don’t matter that she knows a goddamn thing, long as she’s dead. It happens so fast, Doc. She has her back to the opening in the glass and she’s rinsing her hair with her whole head under the water. She can’t even hear me on the creaky floor. I just walk up and BANG to the back of the head. Didn’t even get blood on me, it all hit the glass and the tile. She drops to the floor like a sack of potatoes on mud. She’s just lying there and the showerhead is rinsing her blood down the drain.”

Matthew pauses and looks off into the distance.

“I feel like a ten-ton weight is off me, Doc. It just feels right.”

He leans back into the couch, relaxed now that he’s past the focal point of the story.

“I back out of the bathroom and think about what I’ve touched in the house. But truth is, even if they find my fingerprints or DNA or whatever, it’s my fucking house, right? I used to live there. I pull my sleeve over my hand when I turn the knob on the front door and wipe it down on the other side, just in case. I put the gun in my waistband and just walk back to my car, just easy and slow like I’m out for a stroll.”

At this point, Matthew's phone buzzes and he pulls it out of his front pants pocket. He looks at the screen and laughs.

"My sister-in-law. Wants me to call her. Says it's urgent. I know what that's about. Julianna isn't answering her phone, for obvious reasons," he chuckles and leans back to tuck the phone back in his pocket and continues.

"It was the perfect crime. But it's not even a crime in my mind. She had to die. She deserved to die. I just put things right."

Robert's tongue felt like a piece of fabric against the roof of his mouth. He tried to swallow but there was too much friction. He took a sip of water from a glass on the table and felt his body stiffen.

"When did this happen, Matthew?"

"I dunno, maybe half an hour before I came here. That's why I was early. My house isn't too far, you know, I sorta chose you because you were close by. Remember?"

Robert nodded.

"And now I've told you," Matthew continued, "and you can't tell no one so I'm what you'd call unburdened. I'll get my kids back, get the house back and everything will go back to the way it was. But better."

Robert pursed his lips and considered the tops of his shoes for a long moment. Finally, he looked up to meet his patient's eyes.

"Matthew, what do you mean by, 'you can't tell anyone?'"

Matthew smiled. "That doctor client privilege thing. You're not allowed to say anything about what goes on in here."

Robert patted the knife in his jacket pocket, making sure it was still there.

"Matthew, I think you've misunderstood. What we discuss in therapy is, indeed, privileged but a felony? A murder? Harm to anyone including yourself doesn't fall under that umbrella."

Matthew face paled and he wriggled forward on the couch. "What are you saying, Doc?"

"I'm saying I'm now bound by my oath to call the police." He recoiled at the sound of the words as soon as they left his mouth. When you've committed one murder, what's another one? The energy in the room was suddenly charged and Robert realized he could have just waited until this obviously dangerous man left and then called 911.

“No fucking way Doc.” Matthew was on the edge of the cushion now and he’d be up and coming after Robert in seconds. Robert stood and raised his hands in surrender, anticipating the sight of the man’s gun at any moment.

“Now Matthew, just think about this. Your name is in my datebook, on my digital calendar. It’s in the cloud for goodness’ sake. You’ll never get away with it. Jimmy down at the security desk made you sign in like always. You will be caught in a matter of hours. You don’t have to do this.”

“But I do,” Matthew said. He was standing now, as powerful as an oak tree, and moving slowly toward Robert who was backing up with careful steps. Soon, he’d run out of room and be trapped against the wall.

Robert thrust his hand into his pocket, fingers scrambling for the little button that released the blade on his pocketknife.

“D-d-didn’t you hear me? Your name is everywhere. The police will know it was you. I’ll tell you what. I won’t call them. I won’t tell them after all. I promise. Not a word.”

“I don’t believe you Doc. My only regret is that I left my gun in the glove box but I can still do this the quiet way.”

He was close enough now to put his hands around the therapist’s neck. Robert’s left heel met baseboard and he knew it was now or never. He reached into his pocket and popped the knife open. He yanked it out of the pocket, dragging its serrated edge against the silk lining and making a ripping sound that caught Matthew’s attention. From that point it all happened in slow motion.

Matthew looked down toward the sound of tearing fabric but his brain didn’t have enough information to tell his hands to leave Robert’s neck and protect himself. With one swift action Robert’s knife went higher than even he imagined it would given the wild and untargeted thrust with which it rose. The blade pierced Matthew’s neck, pushing through muscles and tendons until it severed his windpipe and blood spurted out like a broken faucet onto Robert’s face and shoulder, dotting the tweed fabric and darkening one of the suede elbow patches. Instinctively, Robert let go of the knife and pushed the big man as hard as he could. Matthew’s hands grabbed for the gushing wound but instead found the knife’s handle and grasped it like a flute, wheezing, eyes bugging as he stumbled backward.

Robert seized the opportunity to run for the door. He flung it open and shouted “JIM! JIM I’M BEING ATTACKED!” But he had already neutralized the threat. Matthew crumpled to the floor, his wheezes coming slower and softer until finally, his hands fell away from the weapon and he went silent.

Later, as Robert sat in his therapy chair opposite two police officers, he marvelled at the amount of blood left on the carpet by the wound he'd made in Matthew's neck. That carpet would need replacing. He'd be sure to tell Jim to mention it to the building manager the next time he saw him. His jacket was ruined. He had already pulled it off, bunched it into a ball, and pushed it into the waste basket. He could always buy another one. Or maybe something different next time, like a leather bomber.

The female officer, clearly the senior of the two, had opened a note pad and was scribbling on it. The male officer, a rookie, stared at Robert seemingly without blinking. Police and EMS had already visited Matthew's former home and found his wife, just like he had said, the shower head pounding cold water onto her dead body.

The rookie had settled onto the couch but the female was agitated, as if she had information her partner hadn't been apprised of yet and couldn't relax until it was in the open. Her knee bounced and she tapped the end of her pen rhythmically against her note pad.

"This is odd," she said, still looking directly at Robert who now returned her stare. "Mr. Tomlinson is the second of your patients to die in this office. By your hand. How do you explain that?"

"Bad luck, I guess," Robert responded with a smirk.

"The end of a life is never funny, Mr. Langford."

"Doctor."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's Doctor Langford", he said, condescendingly. "I'm a psychologist. A doc-tor not a mister."

"Doctor then. Let's see if I have this right. Seven months ago, a woman who was coming to you for – what do you call it – psychotherapy?"

"That's right. Or therapy. Either will do."

"The woman, Christine Bassett, attempted to kill you with one of your own sculptures. Instead, you acted in your own defence and strangled her. Turned out, Ms. Bassett has already killed her elderly mother. Crushed her skull with a tea kettle. Officers found her on the kitchen floor."

Robert nodded in agreement. "A tragedy." He rubbed his sweaty palms together, eager for the officer to finish her little speech. He'd need to make some phone calls soon if he was going to cancel the rest of the day's appointments.

“And today, Matthew West comes to you after shooting his wife to death and attacks you, leaving you no choice but to thrust a knife into his throat and kill him to save yourself. A knife you just happened to have in your pocket.”

She paused and considered his blank expression.

“Do I have that right, Doctor Langford? Did I miss any important details or facts in my recap?”

“Pretty much how it happened,” Robert said.

The female officer turned to look at her partner who was taking in the room and denied her the knowing eye contact she wanted.

“And this doesn’t seem strange to you.”

Robert looked at the ceiling for a moment, pretending to consider the question carefully.

“A bit of a coincidence I suppose but this is what my work is about. Helping unstable people find stability and meaning in life. Sometimes, despite my – and their – best efforts, we fail.”

“We’re going to need your notes on Mr. West, please.”

“Absolutely, officer. The minute you return with a warrant, I’ll hand them over.” Robert stood as if signalling the interview was over.

“It would go a lot better for everyone if you gave them to me voluntarily.”

“It would go better for you, is what you mean. No, I cannot part with those notes until you bring me a warrant. I must stand firm on that.”

The female officer tapped the back of her hand on her partner’s knee, stood, and nodded her head in the direction of the door. The younger officer immediately got up to follow her.

“We will be back, sir. It won’t be long. We’ll get those notes and see what exactly you were dealing with and whether this entire chain of events could have been prevented.”

“I’m sure you will,” Robert said with a sarcastic edge.

He closed the door behind them and closed his eyes as he leaned back on it. Clearly, it was time to move on. A new location, a fresh start. Put these unfortunate incidents behind him. He missed winters. Maybe Wisconsin? He’d spend some time on ChatGPT musing over career opportunities and the climate before deciding.

Once the police presented their warrant he would have no choice but to hand over his notes taken during sessions with Matthew West. After investigators took possession of pages and pages of doodles, there would be more questions. Rabbits, mice, hedgehogs, turtles and birds instead of perceptions and analyses of the erratic man whose life unravelled before Robert's eyes would prompt so many questions.

Better to pack his bag and drop out of sight. He was confident they couldn't charge him with anything but suspicion was starting to grow. He had been defending himself when he killed Matthew West and when Christine Bassett met her unfortunate end, the poor thing. *It's just cleaner this way*, he thought, as moved toward his desk.

He opened the bottom drawer and unearthed the scotch and glass. Perhaps he could play the part of a prison guard at his next stop. Surely those lost incarcerated souls could use a sympathetic ear. He'd look into the opportunities at Wisconsin prisons before making a final decision.

He poured two fingers and turned to the window where the mid-afternoon sky created his reflection so clearly, it could have passed for a mirror.

He held the glass of scotch up in a toast to himself, considering the possibilities. He often thought he could pass for a pastor, another vocation that draws troubled souls like magnets. *It's a possibility*, he mused as he cautioned himself to dispense with this ritual quickly and vacate the premises before the officers had a chance to complete their paperwork and come back for him.

"Another good day, my friend," he said as he brought the glass to his lips and smiled at himself in the glass. "Another very good day."