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Curing Sarah

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Curing Sarah

In 1963 Sarah was a 14-year old brunette, a young athletic woman preparing to attend school in northern Massachusetts. Months earlier, her guidance counselor asked her mother to consider sending her to a New England Boarding School called Northfield.

"I want her to go, Charlie," her mother said to her father and oddly enough, as it turned out, the owner of the Concrete Pipe Company where her mother worked in East Paterson, New Jersey, had studied engineering with the President of the school which was why he offered to fund a scholarship for Sarah if she was ready.

She took the exams and passed. Sarah was no dummy. Even at fourteen she knew education came in many forms. At Northfield School, she learned the girls were guided by a school philosophy impacting on everything she did. All the girls rose early, helped in the kitchen, did rural work and studied hard.

Sarah's roommate, Hope, was from Connecticut. She had long blond hair, a kind voice and a practical way about her. Their room was simple, conducive for studying with two cots and two desks pushed together near a large latticed window. The campus was located on what she believed was the sweetest patch of land on earth in the rolling northern hills of the state with pathways crisscrossing each other so students could get from one building to another. No cars. No TVs. No radios. Hills and grass and apple trees and deep blue skies.

Sarah was quickly initiated into the world of the school. In her religion class she dove head first into existentialism reading *I and Thou* by Martin Buber, a book about human relationships and the need to be honest and present. A student in her class named Marjorie, a senior who lived down the hall from her, made friends with her on the first day. Soon, they became fast friends and talked about everything, about Buber, relationships, daily events, family. They connected right away.

Months later, the President, John F. Kennedy, was assassinated in Dallas. The campus, isolated as it was, fell silent except for the church bells ringing most of the day and into the night. All the students sat in the chapel listening to talks about the book of Job and reasons for any good man's death. The whole country went silent for days on end.

Marjorie and Sarah became even closer then. In almost no time they were inseparable. Sarah wanted to be around Marjorie as much as possible, more than she had ever wanted to be around someone. She didn't know what to do about how she felt. One day she received a card in her mail box describing a free service for students with questions. She made an appointment the next day.

Dr. Jeffrey King shook her hand warmly at the beginning of her first session with him. She liked him right away. He looked like someone she could trust.

"You can trust me, Sarah," he said. "I am a psychiatrist from Boston." He was on the staff of Harvard's counseling service long associated with Northfield and Mt. Hermon.

"Obviously," Dr. King said to Sarah at the end of their third session together, "you are in love with Marjorie." He always wore the same navy blazer for their sessions and she stared at the gold buttons on it when he said this. The buttons had little sailboats etched on them. Each boat looked like it was about to set out to sea.

"I didn't say that," she said to him right off.

"Clearly this is so," he said.

"But look at me," she said. "Are you saying I don't actually have to say it to make it so? Don't I look okay to you?"

“Yes,” he said. “And yes, Sarah, you do actually look nice in your outfit today but what I said is nonetheless true.”

“Nonetheless?”

“Nonetheless.”

Sarah Fuchs was completely overwhelmed at that moment as a sense of foreboding washed over her. She tried to talk with her roommate Hope when she got back to her dorm.

“I don’t know what you are saying,” Hope said to her as she sat on her bed, cross-legged in hair curlers, studying German nouns and practicing her umlauts.

Of course Hope didn’t understand what she was saying because Sarah kept peppering what she was saying with words like I and thou.

“I don’t get it,” Hope said. “I’m sorry, hon.”

Sarah finally told her about Dr. King from Harvard. Hope was quick to give her advice once she knew this part of the story. “Get out of there, Sarah,” she said, “Tell him nothing.”

She was too late. Sarah had already trusted him with her inner life. She told him she wanted to see Marjorie all the time. She told him Marjorie said they were connected and that was how it was with some people. Sarah already knew she would always care for Marjorie and if Dr. King wanted to call it love, it probably was love but not in the way he meant it.

“Lay low,” Hope told her.

Days later, the headmaster Dr. Meany, her mother and her father and Dr. King were all waiting for Sarah when she came back to the dorm after classes.

Dr. Meany smiled. “We only want the best for you, Sarah,” he said.

“Yes,” Dr. King reiterated.

She took off her blue winter coat and hat and sat down in the large chair next to him. “You told them. You said what I told you was confidential. And I never said I loved her. You did.”

“I had to tell them, Sarah,” he said.

She knew he didn’t.

“He had to tell us,” her father said from the front seat of his white snow covered leased Cadillac as they drove home to New Jersey later that night. “We’re the adults.”

“Everybody will know, Charlie,” her mother said to her father.

“She has to be cured,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Cured of what?” she asked her father from the seat in the back but he didn’t answer.

When she got home, Sarah was enrolled in Hasbrouck Heights High School in New Jersey where she went to all her classes. She rarely went out, listening to Barbra Streisand records and studying until she fell asleep. One afternoon her father picked her up after school and drove her to a professional office on Main Street in Englewood.

That’s where she met Dr. Sugarman for her first appointment. Sugarman was a tall man with a round face, dressed in a blue silk shirt. He wore large black glasses and on and off held a pipe in his hand but he never lit it. He had what she thought was an endless supply of yellow pads and he wrote on them with a fountain pen in turquoise ink.

“Everything has significance,” she learned from reading Vladimir Nabokov. She was reading the *New Yorker* by then but she wasn’t going to tell Sugarman. The world was amok with significance and she figured he was on the lookout for it.

Of course, the problem with Hope’s advice to “tell him nothing” was that Sugarman wanted her to do all the talking.

“How will you know when I am cured?” she asked him.

He answered when she asked. "You'll know."

She didn't. "But how will I know when this time is if I don't know when it is?"

Soon she learned what to tell Sugarman before each session. She told him how she'd gone to the 8th grade prom with a tall cute guy, the best dancer in the school. His name was Bill Bennet. He brought her roses. Yellow ones.

Sarah also told Sugarman she never said she loved Marjorie. "Dr. King did," she told him more than once especially at the outset of their meetings. "Why don't we talk to Dr. King then?"

Sarah said as little as she could about Marjorie. Instead she told him how she liked reading and how she was reading William Makepiece Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. She told him she wanted to get back on her path.

"Won't you have to be cured first, then?" he said nonchalantly. He loved his own insouciant style and she was onto the fact he did.

"Yes," she said. "Cured." She started using the word herself sometimes because Sugarman insisted on using it.

"Everybody knows," her mother told her constantly.

"But how could they understand this?" She did not think they did. "It's complicated. Private."

On that day, several hours before she fell asleep, after three months of visits to Sugarman, she decided to be cured. She didn't know how this was to happen or exactly when.

"We all make mistakes," Sugarman said to her in a session soon after her decision to be cured. "We have to make good on them."

"I think I have," she said to him even more determined.

"Have what?" he asked.

"What you want me to say," she said

"I want you to say what you are going to make good on. Only you know what that is." She knew he wanted her to say she did not love women and would never love women and would only love men and she would never say she loved a woman (which she had never said in the first place) again.

She tried to talk to him about existentialist philosophers and he told her she was too young to talk about such bold ideas about life and death (and she knew he didn't know the answer.) She tried talking about psychology (he hated that).

But what Sarah wanted to know was what to say and how to say it so it would count as a cure. "I shopped for clothes today," she added.

Sugarman loved that. "Tell me more," he said.

"And I think I may be cured," she said as directly as she could.

He was listening intently.

"I will wear the most beautiful dresses and go to New York shows with my friend Bill again." She went on talking about dresses. Sarah overheard her father talking about how a cure had to have boundaries. He said Sugarman agreed with him there had to be a time line.

In the library she looked up the so-called disease. She wanted to know what was actually being cured. Certainly it could not be love. Love was a good thing. She learned after much reading there was no real disease, only a cure.

"What exactly is the disease?" she asked him early on.

"Who said anything about a disease."

She remembered Hope's entreaty. "Talking in itself can create the problem."

"Even when there is no problem?" Sarah asked.

“Yes, Sarah, that is what I have been telling you. For God’s sakes, tell them nothing.”

The number of days before the Memorial Day holiday of the same year, Sarah was busy practicing what she wanted to say in the mirror. She had just arrived home from High School and her father was about to drive her to see Sugarman. It was Tuesday.

She had seen a stack of brochures on the table next to Sugarman’s desk for a month. They were all about Italy. They outlined a 28 day tour in July to Florence and Naples and a week in Rome.

After the session, her father took her for an ice cream and they walked around the duck pond nearby to talk. “The mind,” her father said to her (as if it was something he had memorized) “learns to block things out. The mind closes the door,” he said and made a motion with his hand as if to shut the door.

She knew now Sugarman was going to Italy. She knew her father wanted her to return to Northfield. She felt some kind of deal had been struck and all she had to do was close the door.

“How are you Sarah?” Sugarman asked at their next session.

“I am well,” she said, “I think I have been able to shut the door now.”

He leaned forward. “Really?”

She knew she was on the right track. “Yes.”

Sugarman smiled. She moved forward in her chair to see if it was actually a smile. It was thin and pencilly but she was sure it was the real deal. It was a true sign. They sat for the rest of the session in complete silence. Sarah was happy. It had been a long year. Sugarman was thinking about Italy. She was sure of that too.

She was looking forward to returning to school in the Fall. She missed the sweet grass on the rolling hills. She was cured of the disease of not saying she was in love with a woman.

Sarah knew she had to go back to Northfield. She had no place else to go. Marjorie was off to a coed school and she was cured and she had so much promise ahead of her. Everyone said so.

Charlene Langfur is an organic gardener, a Californian born in Hackensack, New Jersey, a Syracuse University Graduate Writing Fellow. Her writing has appeared in many journals and magazines including *The Adirondack Review*, *Poetry East*, and most currently in *The Toronto Quarterly*, *Assisi*, *Steam Ticket*, and this fall in *The Hampden Sydney Poetry Review*.