Demonology and the Tri-Phasic Model of Trauma: An Integrative Approach

by Nnm

Summary

As soon as Aubrey Thyme, psychotherapist, had opened her office door and seen her new client, Anthony J. Crowley, sitting in her waiting area, she was observing and assessing him. At first glance, she paid attention to the following:

--His clothing was expensive and stylish;
--He wore very strange but noticeable cologne;
--His relationship to the seat he occupied could only, very loosely, be described as “sitting;”
--He looked angry;
--He was wearing sunglasses.

What Aubrey Thyme, a professional, thought, upon first seeing her new client was: you’re going to be a fun one, aren’t you?
Notes

To find a therapist near you, check out Psychology Today's Find a Therapist database.

To learn more about trauma and its effects on the brain, check out Bessel van der Kolk's The Body Keeps the Score.

If you need to talk to someone immediately:

In the USA, you can call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.

In the UK, you can call Samaritans at 116 123.

In Canada, you can call Crisis Services Canada at 1-833-456-4566.

See the end of the work for more notes.
“Oedipus complex,” is the first thing he said to her. “Your opinion?”

Aubrey Thyme was a professional. She had over ten years of experience providing individual and group therapy, with special focus on serving trauma survivors. She had had clients threaten her, scream obscenities in her face, proposition her for sex, and even worse. She had worked clients through the process of hospitalization, she had reported actionable threats of violence and self-harm to the police, and she had heard descriptions of anguish, pain and loss worse than most others can imagine. Aubrey Thyme was a professional, and she was professionally trained and experienced with managing terrible, confusing, and challenging clients.

And yet, even with more than ten years of experience, there are still ways in which a professional like Aubrey Thyme can be surprised. That’s the thrill of the job, after all: there are always surprises. For instance, a professional like Aubrey Thyme could have a brand new client, coming into her office for the very first meeting, plop down in the seat across from her and say, “Oedipus complex. Your opinion?” the way that this client, Anthony, just had.

Part of being a professional mental health therapist is having a keen, observant eye. From the moment of first contact with a client, or potential client, a professional like Aubrey Thyme pays attention to every hint about a client’s identity, personality, problems and paths to solutions. This is why, when this client, Anthony, plopped down and said, “Oedipus complex. Your opinion?” she wasn’t left stuttering.

As soon as Aubrey Thyme had opened her office door and seen her new client, Anthony, sitting in her waiting area, she was observing and assessing him. At first glance, she paid attention to the following:

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What Aubrey Thyme, a professional, thought, upon first seeing her new client was: you’re going to be a fun one, aren’t you?

She had invited him into her office. She had smiled, kind, and he hadn’t smiled back. He stood, he moved past her, and he didn’t say a single thing, not even a greeting, until he plopped into her chair and asked for her opinion on Oedipal complexes.

A therapist didn’t have to be a professional with over ten years of experience dealing with particularly challenging cases of severe trauma to know how to respond to this. A therapist worth even half her weight in salt would know how to respond to this. So Aubrey Thyme had settled into the seat across from Anthony and said, like even the half-salt therapist would have, “Why do you ask?”

He clearly wasn’t impressed, but she was okay with that. He was trying to bait her into a power struggle; he wanted to needle her into trying to prove herself to him. He was still wearing those sunglasses.

“Last time I tried this,” he said, “I spent hours lying on a couch, and then I got an earful about
Oedipal complexes. I’m not doing that again.”

She listened. She nodded. What she heard was: *I’m scared. Displease me, and I won’t stay.* This was her job, to convince him to stay.

“It sounds like you saw a pretty traditional Freudian psychoanalyst.”

“Well, yeah. It was Freud.”

That didn’t make sense to her. By the flare of his nostrils and the set of his mouth, she could tell that he didn’t expect it to make sense to her. He wanted to fluster her, she was certain, because doing so would let him win the power struggle he wanted them to be in. So she wouldn’t be flustered.

“I’m not a Freudian. I don’t think I’ve ever talked about Oedipus in a session before.” She smiled.

The fact that she gave the right answer didn’t mean he was done testing her. Aubrey Thyme, professional, understood that Anthony was someone who would not be done testing her for a very long time.

“I’d like to start by getting to know a bit more about what brings you here,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said, and then he didn’t go on.

One of the first skills Aubrey Thyme, professional therapist, had developed was the ability to sit with silence. It can be terrifying and overwhelming, sitting in a small room in complete silence with another, especially when that other is a very angry man who still hasn’t taken off his sunglasses. It can be unsettling, and most people have a compelling urge to fill up every uncomfortable silence with chatter. But that wasn’t what Anthony needed right now, she decided. What Anthony needed, she thought, was the experience of waiting as long as it took for him to say what he needed to say.

Another one of the first professional skills Aubrey Thyme had developed was the ability to surreptitiously keep an eye on a clock, no matter what. That’s how she knew that Anthony was silent for a full thirty seconds before he continued.

“Something happened a while ago. I haven’t been okay since then. I need you to fix it.”

So far as trauma narratives go, that wasn’t the worst she had ever heard in a first session with a client. With another client, she might respond: *it is very hard to talk about, isn’t it?* Or maybe: *I’m really touched that you’d share that with me, thank you.* Or maybe something else. But given everything she had learned about Anthony so far, she decided on: “What happened?”

“There was a fire. I thought my friend was dead.”

“That sounds very painful.”

“It was.”

“Your friend wasn’t dead?”

“No.” He shook his head. “He’s fine.”

“And, now, you’re not okay.”

“Nope.”
Pulling teeth, she thought. “Tell me a bit more about that,” she said. “How are you not okay?”

He twisted and fidgeted and he rolled his eyes in an exaggerated way that must have been designed to let her recognize he was doing it despite the sunglasses. *He has a lot of practice doing that*, she thought. The movement allowed her to notice the tattoo on the side of his face. She was going to have to think about that tattoo, later.

“I looked it up,” he said. “They’re flashbacks. I’m having flashbacks to the fire.”

She nodded her head. It was one of her professional nods. It was the nod that said, *That makes total sense to me.* “Anything else?”

“Nope.”

“Changes in mood?”

“Nope.”

She paused, so that she could let her professionally-trained mind evaluate her options. Anthony was testing her, and she decided she wanted to test him back. “Is that true? Because you seem really on edge.”

“Just my winning personality,” he said.

“A lot of people, after a traumatic event, find themselves feeling angry and on edge. You sure you haven’t noticed any changes like that?”

She watched him think. He had a lot to think about, here. She knew that many people, after experiencing a trauma, lost touch with their emotions. He could be like that; he could honestly need to think, to access his emotions, to find the answer to her question. She also knew it was possible he was still testing her, and he wanted to see how far she would prod before she gave up. Or: he could be deciding whether he wanted to keep up with the lies. That, she thought, was the most likely scenario.

Anthony, she was starting to understand, was a liar.

Aubrey Thyme liked working with liars. Not all therapists do. A lot see lies as poison to the therapeutic encounter, but not Aubrey Thyme. Aubrey Thyme, in all her experience, had found liars to be interesting enough to be worth the potential for frustration. Liars were fun.

“Yeah, okay,” he said, and he leaned back in his seat. She noted the shift in posture: leaning away, turning his head to the side. He had given the most meager crumb of emotional truth, and he compensated by increasing physical distance. “I have been told I have been irritable.” He made a complicated gesture with his hand. “More irritable than usual, that is.”

“Your winning personality,” she said.

He grinned. *That's promising*, she thought.

“Who told you you’ve been more irritable lately?”

“My friend,” he said, and he was shifting his posture in the seat again. Her back started to feel antsy, vicariously. “We’re not going to talk about him.”

“Is this the same friend you thought had died?”
His mouth opened, then hung there for a moment. He clearly knew he’d been caught, was stuck. “Yeah. Yeah, him.”

“Then I think we’re probably going to have to talk about him.” She made a gesture with her hands, like laying out options, like offering a consolation: *here’s all I have to offer.*

He made a little noise, somewhere between a grunt and a whine.

“So, tell me about him,” she suggested. She shifted now, crossing one leg over the other, and she shrugged.

“His name is Ezra. He owns a bookshop. It was the bookshop that was on fire. That’s all you need to know.”

Anthony liked to decide what she did and did not need to know. She put that observation aside for later; she’d have work to do, developing her full account of him, after her time with him was up.

“Ezra’s bookshop was on fire,” she summarized. “You thought he was dead -- in the fire? And now you’re having flashbacks, and you’re irritable.”

“I was in the fire,” he said, and it was like he wasn’t in the room with her anymore, like he was off, somewhere else, somewhere far too hot and without exits. From the look of him, Aubrey Thyme surmised, his blood pressure just spiked, his heart rate was climbing, and his skin just went clammy. He was so thin, she could see every muscle move in his face and hands as his whole body tensed. She watched as he didn’t breathe.

“Stay with me,” she said, and she said it in the very specific tone she used in situations like this. Because this wasn’t an unusual situation, not for a professional like Aubrey Thyme, who specialized in cases of trauma. “Anthony. You here with me? Look at me. I’m here with you.”

His sunglasses meant she couldn’t see where his eyes were, but she guessed she had gotten his attention. She made a point to breathe in deeply, and she was gratified to see him follow suit. She waited. She breathed. She watched Anthony. He returned to the present, to the room. All things considered, it didn’t take him that long.

“I have more questions for you,” she said. She made sure her voice was quieter now. She knew how to use her voice to modulate others’ emotions. “But I think we should put them off for now.”

She waited for a response, but he didn’t give one, so she went on. “Instead, how about I teach you something that may be able to help, when this sort of thing happens.”

“Yeah?” he asked, in a certain way, and it was a way that made Aubrey Thyme’s heart nearly break open. She was used to this, feeling her heart break open, when clients sounded and looked as Anthony did right now, especially the liars. This is how she always felt, when she saw someone’s angry and irritable veil pull aside, to reveal the scared and lonely child hiding within. Anthony had done that. He was giving up to her a kernel of raw hope.

She wanted to deserve it.

“It’s called five-four-three-two-one. It’s a grounding technique. Ever heard of it?”

He shook his head.

“Okay.” She smiled. “Let me explain what it is.”
They got to work.

When the hour was over, Anthony was a little calmer. After he had walked out and she shut her door, she let herself feel all the pent up nerves she had been hiding from him. She breathed in, deep long breaths, and she closed her eyes. She had spent an hour drinking up Anthony’s anger and pain and confusion and palpable distrust, and she had ten minutes to let it all out of her system, before her next client arrived.

She put the odds of Anthony coming back for the next session at 50/50.

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At a certain level of abstraction, there are three phases to trauma therapy. This is, at least, what the tri-phasic model of trauma therapy says. Aubrey Thyme found it to be a useful model.

The first phase is all about safety. A therapeutic alliance must be formed. In this phase, the client gains trust in himself and the therapist. Focus is put on learning skills—grounding techniques, breathing techniques, meditative techniques, and so on—that help with the symptoms of trauma-related disturbances. The goal is to give the client the tools he needs to cope with the pain that will come, in later phases, when focus switches to confronting and overcoming the traumatic memories, themselves.

Different clients, of course, have different safety needs. This first phase takes longer for some clients, rather than others. After a first session with a client, Aubrey Thyme usually had a fairly good idea of how long it would take before they could move on to phase two, but she never knew for sure. There were always surprises, set-backs, and unforeseen developments.

She wasn’t sure, after just one meeting with Anthony, how long it would take. But she had a pretty strong suspicion: they’d be ready to move out of the safety stage, only once those bullshit sunglasses came off his face.

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“I’m starting to worry you’re no good at your job,” Anthony said, soon as he was properly spread out in her office’s chair.

They had met a few times now. Each time, she was surprised he came back—especially after she had double-checked his address. (Google Maps told her that London was a 9-hour flight from her office in Rochester, New York. “Quite a commute,” she had said, and he nodded. “Especially for someone who’s retired,” she’d added, and he hadn’t responded. He was a liar. But he paid in cash, and his phone number worked, so she went with it.) Each time, he started out the session with a very clear establishment of ground rules: *I can leave any time, I don’t need you, prove yourself to me.*

That was okay. Aubrey Thyme, after all, was a professional. This wasn’t the first time a client had questioned her competence. It wasn’t even the hundredth. The good thing about experience is, it helps you take things in stride.

“Now, why’s that?” she asked.

He reached up a hand, index finger extended. He tapped that finger against the frame of his sunglasses.

*Ho-ho!* she thought, but she didn’t let it show. “You wanna explain what you mean?” she asked.
“You used to people in here wearing sunglasses the whole time?”

_Do you have to be so goddamned adversarial about everything?_ She thought. “No, not at all,” she said.

“Isn’t that the sort of thing people in your profession should, you know, comment on?”

She grinned, and she knew what effect that would have on him. He wanted her unsettled; he wanted power in this encounter, so he could feel safe from the distance it inspired. She grinned, and in so doing, she robbed him of that. “Yeah? You think so?”

He shrugged.

She robbed him of the safety that came from him unsettling her, because she wanted to replace it, instead, with a different kind of safety. The safety that comes from honest conversation. “You’re right,” she acknowledged. “It definitely is the sort of thing people in my profession tend to comment on.”

He shrugged again.

“And, I’ll tell you, Anthony, it’s definitely something I’ve been thinking about.” She waited, but he didn’t react, so she went on. “I’ve thought about bringing them up. Want to know why I haven’t?”

He was too unmoored to acknowledge his curiosity.

“It’s because…” and she drew this out a little, because maybe she could be a little cruel with adversarial liars like Anthony, at least when she knew it wouldn’t backfire too badly. “I figured, soon as you were ready to talk about them, you’d bring them up.”

She let him sit there and think about that. She let her grin settle into a satisfied smile.

“I don’t want to talk about them,” he mumbled.

“Then we don’t have to.”

“I have an eye condition.”

“Ah, I didn’t know that.” She nodded now, and she let her mind work that information into her theories about him. “Thank you for letting me know.”

He hated being thanked. He hated it now. She kept smiling.

“I don’t want to talk about them,” he said again.

“So you said,” she nodded. “You know, something else about people in my profession? When we hear someone say they don’t want to talk about something? Especially if they say it more than once? We tend to pay attention to that.”

She saw him frown, behind the dark lenses.

“We tend to think it means, they actually really do want to talk about it.”

“I don’t.”

“So you’ve said.” She smiled. “Three times now.”
He was tired of this game. He groaned and he shifted in the seat, somehow coming even closer to mocking the concept of ‘sitting’ than any human had any right to. She would be pushing her luck, if she kept up with this any longer.

“You don’t want to talk about them, we don’t talk about them. You want to keep them on, you keep them on. But if you do want to talk about them, then we’ll talk about them.”

Eyes on the clock: forty-five seconds passed before he spoke again.

“No one actually calls me Anthony,” he said. She was getting better at reading his face, despite the sunglasses, and she could tell he wasn’t looking at her.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Crowley. I go by Crowley.” Now he looked towards her, and his lips twitched.

“I’ll remember that.” For most clients, first names had greater intimacy than last names. But Aubrey Thyme could tell that this wasn’t the case for Anthony--for Crowley. This was a gift, an olive branch of sorts, being offered. “Thank you for letting me know, Crowley.”

He hated being thanked. He could tolerate it, but he hated it. That’s why she kept doing it.

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She made a note of every single time he mentioned the sunglasses. She looked for the patterns, for the eliciting events that led to him bringing them up. Sometimes, like right now, he brought them up in order to change the subject.

“If I were to take them off, you wouldn’t think of me the same way anymore,” he said, as if the referent for ‘them’ had been established already, as if the two of them had been in a conversation about the sunglasses. But they hadn’t been. She had, instead, been asking about why he didn’t like practicing breathing techniques at home. This annoyed her, but she was a woman of her word: when he wanted to talk about the sunglasses, they talked about them.

“How do you think I would think of you?”

“You’d…” Crowley often started talking before he knew how to finish what he wanted to say. His mind worked fast, after all, and he still didn’t trust her. “You wouldn’t see me as human anymore.”

“Wow,” she said, and she let herself show the weight that those words had for her. She watched him fidget. He was hiding something, which seemed strange. Most people, when they admit that something would make them no longer feel human, have exposed themselves. Somehow, though, not him. “What does it mean to you, to be human?”

Something very complicated passed across his face, like a smile and a grimace and a sneer. She would think about that later. “It means being free,” he said.

“If you take your sunglasses off,” she summarized, “then you wouldn’t be free.”

“I don’t practice at home, because Ezra doesn’t know I come here.”

She could get whiplash, trying to follow Crowley’s attempts at deflection. “Okay, okay,” she said, and she put out her hands. “I really think we should talk about both of these things. But we can’t talk about them at the same time. Sunglasses, or Ezra. Which do you want to start with?”
“Neither.” Because Crowley was, if nothing, petty. “Whichever. I don’t care.”

“So choose.”

“Sunglasses, fine,” as if this were a favor to her, a great sacrifice on his part for her benefit.

“Okay.” She nodded and gave herself a moment to work out a strategy, repositioning a bit in her seat. “Let me ask this. Suppose you were to take them off, in here, with me. What’s the absolute worst thing you think could happen?”

“You’d turn into a pillar of salt.”

He did this sometimes. He made dumb jokes, and they usually were littered with Biblical allusions. This was, also, something she kept notes on. She didn’t understand why he did it, but she knew he didn’t expect her to. It was his own private way of having fun at her expense, it seemed. She waited.

“You’d scream and run out the door and then you wouldn’t meet with me again,” he mumbled.

She nodded. “So that’s the absolute worst. How likely do you think that is? Scale of one to ten, where one is not likely at all, and ten is absolute certainty.”

“Hm, four.”

“So it could happen, but it’s not so likely.”

“No.”

“What do you think the most likely result would be?”

“You’d probably scream a little, but you’d try to hide it.” He paused, sucking at his teeth. “You’d thank me for being so brave and strong.”

She had done that a few sessions ago. He was mocking. All the same, she thought it mattered that he remembered, and that the words had affected him enough to bring them up again. “Okay,” she said, not taking his bait. “And how likely is that?”

“Probably, around seven.”

“What’s the absolute best thing you think could happen?”

He hadn’t been expecting that. He sat up a little in his chair, which she thought was interesting. “I guess—I guess, nothing.”

“Nothing. You take your sunglasses off, I see your eyes, and absolutely nothing happens.”

“Nothing changes.”

She smiled. “Right, yes. Because nothing about your eyes can change who you are.”

He thought about that. He didn’t respond.

“How likely is it?”

He glared, and then he said, “We’re already past ten. Worst case is four, most likely case is seven. We’re dealing with impossible probabilities.”
“Humor me. How likely?”

“Two.”

Aubrey Thyme was a professional. She had a professional interest in what eye condition her client, Anthony Crowley, could have. She had a professional interest in coming to understand why he was so scared to show his eyes to another, and why he thought the sight of his uncovered face would be so terrifying that the whole of their relationship would change. But Aubrey Thyme wasn’t just a professional, she was also a human. And, as a human, she had a deeply prurient interest in what the hell could possibly be under those dark lenses.

They didn’t get around to talking about Ezra, that session. It was unfortunate, but time was up.

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Aubrey Thyme liked to think of the human mind as like a spider web. This wasn’t particularly creative of her, it was a common metaphor, but it was a useful one. Each strand in the web was a belief. The peripheral strands were simple beliefs, easily shaken off with counter-evidence, insignificant. The center of the web were the core beliefs, however, the ones that shaped the whole of one’s identity. Pluck at one of these core strands, and the whole of a person could change. Aubrey Thyme spent much of her work trying to locate the core strands in other peoples’ webs so that she could then pluck them.

She wasn’t foolish enough to think she could ever understand the whole web of a person. Everyone hides something. Psychology is just goddamned complicated, and there would always be unanswered questions about any client, no matter how long the work lasted. This was something that Aubrey Thyme was used to: balancing an intense curiosity with a realistic gauge of human limitations.

Her work with Crowley had left her with some sense of the web occupying his mind. She had glimpsed, now and then, at some of those core strands of belief. But there were also, still, some very serious questions she had about him, holes in her knowledge of him that she knew were interfering with their work. She had had these questions, ever since he first filled out the demographic forms, the first day they met.

For pronouns, he selected ‘he/him.’ For gender, however, he wrote, “No.” For sexuality, he wrote nothing. For religious affiliation, he wrote, “Sure, why not.”

That last one was what surprised her the most. He looked like someone who would be angry at the very idea of religion. He had the look of a man (?) who had dabbled in Satanism before it turned passe, someone who had given it up once he realized atheism fit his wardrobe better.

The other demographic information didn’t surprise her too terribly much. Crowley was, after all, a man (?) of a certain age, and she was used to men of a certain age, with certain persuasions, feeling uncomfortable describing certain aspects of their identities. But she still needed to ask about it. It was a conversation they needed to have.

They needed to have this conversation, because she was starting to glimpse what was at the very center of the web in Crowley’s mind. She was seeing, over and over again, how deeply entrenched that core of Crowley’s mind was, how every other single aspect of this man (?) revolved around that core. For most people, that core is some set of beliefs about oneself. For Crowley, however, it was someone else.

Ezra. She needed to know more about this Ezra.
The opportunity came up one session, the way so many of them did with Crowley: he was rude. They were in the middle of session when his phone went off. This happened, now and then, with clients. Most people forget to turn their phones to silent. She was used to a client giving a sheepish smile, scrambling to pull out their phone, and turning it off. Sometimes the client would make hushed apologies, telling her as it rang that they needed to answer, and then taking the call. But not Crowley, oh no. Soon as the phone went off, it had his full attention, far more than she ever did. He was unapologetic, uncaring, giving no excuse or explanation. He fished it out of his pocket, standing and turning his back to her, and he answered.

“What’s wrong?” He said as he answered. She could just slightly hear the voice on the other end, but she could only make out Crowley’s part of the conversation. She thought she heard another British accent, matching his. “Oh. Oh. No, yeah, that’s fine. Seven. Sounds good. Uh-huh. Hm. Uh-huh.”

This was the part in the phone call where most people would say, *I’m in the middle of something, I’ll call you back.* Crowley didn’t.

“Can’t you just, you know? Ah. I see. Yes, fine. I can pick that up on the way. It’s fine. Yeah.”

She would have felt guilty for eavesdropping, but he was, after all, in her office. She cleared her throat.


Crowley wasn’t the sort to say *ta-taa*, unless he was mocking someone. He sounded like he was mocking someone, but there was no barb to it. He hung up the phone and sat back down.

He had the look of a man (?) who knew he wasn’t getting out of this alive.

“Ezra,” he said.

“He still doesn’t know you come here?”

“No.”

“Can we talk about that?”

“No.” He was a liar. “I don’t want him to worry.”

“He worries about you.”

“It’s his specialty.”

“You worry about him?”

“Eh,” he grunted, not accepting her wording. “I look after him.”

“You care about him.”

He nodded.

“You love him?”

That was risky. Aubrey Thyme, professional that she was, knew that sometimes one had to take a
risk. She watched closely as Crowley became very still, far stiller than he ever sat before.

“We don’t use that word,” he said, after a fifteen second pause.

“Is there a better word?”

Twenty-three seconds, then: he shook his head.

“Did you love him, before the fire?”

“From the beginning,” he said. This was the sort of situation where she would normally expect him to hide behind his sarcasm and private jokes, but he didn’t. He was earnest. Crowley, she determined, did not joke about this relationship.

“It’s touching,” she said, and she smiled. “You two found each other, and it sounds like you have something very special together.”

“You’re a sap,” he said, but there wasn’t any rancor to it. In fact, he was smiling, even.

*The way past Crowley’s sunglasses, she thought, is through his Ezra.*
Chapter Summary

Aubrey Thyme, psychotherapist, helps her cantankerous client, Anthony J. Crowley, work through the terrifying challenge of being seen.

“I’d like to talk to you about your sunglasses today, if that’s alright with you.” This was the first time she had ever brought them up, herself. She had been waiting, previously, but now she felt it was time. It was her job, after all, to challenge him.

“I’m shocked,” he said, and she thought maybe he meant he was relieved.

“I’m wondering, are there any times when you don’t wear them?”

“Of course, don’t be stupid.”

Such a sweetheart you are, she thought. She waited.

“I don’t wear them at home.” He stretched out in the chair, the way he did when he wanted greater physical comfort, as if it could compensate for the other sort of discomfort he was feeling. “I don’t wear them when I’m alone.”

“What about when you’re with Ezra?” she asked. She used her most casual tone, her most practiced casual tone.

“Sometimes.”

“But not always.”

“Nope.”

“What’s it like? Being with Ezra, without your sunglasses on?”

“I can see right through you,” he said, like he was disappointed, like she had finally failed his tests. But she hadn’t. She knew she hadn’t. She knew this, because he hadn’t changed his posture in his seat.

“I’m not trying to trick you, Crowley.” She shrugged. “Therapy isn’t a magic act.”

“Want to know why I picked you?” he asked. He raised an eyebrow at her, the way he did when he wanted her to know she was in his sights.

“Sure,” she said. She was not certain if this was the right choice or not. Even an experienced professional, like Aubrey Thyme, is subject to doubt and the occasional mistake. He was deflecting, and she was letting him get away with it. But she had been the one to bring up the sunglasses, this time, and if he needed to deflect away from that topic, she would let him. For now.

“I looked you up, you know.”

“Makes sense.” Most people did. There was too much information online, and she wouldn’t trust a
client who denied having looked up any profiles of her.

“You’re an atheist,” he said.

_That_, she was certain, _was not_ in any of her profiles. “I’m sorry?”

“You’re an atheist,” he repeated, repositioning himself, leaning forward, arms bolstered by his legs. He was watching her, she could tell he was watching her. Sometimes he did that: he could be very observant. “I chose you, because you’re an atheist.”

Several different strands of thought crossed through Aubrey Thyme’s mind at once. First, she thought, _how the fuck does he know that?_ Second, she thought, _why does he care about that?_ Third, she thought, _goddamnit, he just unsettled me, he just got exactly what he wanted._ Finally, she thought, _how does this relate to sunglasses?_

Some of those strands were important insights which could have significant therapeutic value for her client, others were wholly personal. She let herself sort the two groups apart, before she responded.

“It was important to you to work with someone who shared your worldview,” she said, her voice as level as all her training and experience allowed it to be.

He tsked. “No. I just didn’t want to talk to someone who believes in eternal damnation.”

Part of the reason that Aubrey Thyme became a therapist was that she liked puzzles. She liked how humans were puzzles, how psychology was one of the last great puzzles available to science. She liked taking the frazzled, incoherent beliefs and feelings of a person and setting them all in order, getting the pieces of their identity to line up correctly. She liked the feeling of the puzzle being solved. She disliked the feeling of a puzzle that wouldn’t solve. That was the feeling she had right now. It pissed her off.

“How about you answer my question?” she asked, harsher than was perhaps entirely professional. “What is it like, not wearing your sunglasses around Ezra?”

“It’s not like anything.”

“Really? Not like anything?” She leaned forward in her seat a bit, arms bolstered by her legs, mirroring his posture back at him. She raised her eyebrows. “I can see right through you, too, Crowley.”

He snorted. She waited.

“He says he likes my eyes.” He looked away now, he settled down. So she did, too.

“He sees you, and he likes what he sees.”

Crowley’s breath hitched, audibly. He hadn’t expected that, and he also hadn’t meant to let her perceive the extent to which he hadn’t expected that. He was still looking away.

“What does it feel like, when he sees you?” she insisted.

A minute. Two. Three. Three minutes, and he didn’t move a muscle. Three whole minutes, and she didn’t either. Three minutes of thick silence is a very long time.

“It feels like the opposite of eternal damnation.”
She gave those words her whole focus. She committed them to memory. She wanted to be able to quote them later, word for word, in her notes. She worked, hard, to try to understand them. On one hand, she did: it was obvious what the opposite of eternal damnation would feel like. On the other hand, however, she felt like she understood nothing: why this wording, why this emphasis? What leads someone to say *it feels like unconditional love* by saying, instead, *it feels like the opposite of eternal damnation*?

She didn’t have the answers she wanted, but that wasn’t what mattered, not right now. What mattered, instead, were the needs of the client sitting in front of her, head pointed off to the side, casual posture belied by how his hands clutched at the arms of his chair.

“Thank you,” she said. He didn’t respond. “No, really. Thank you,” she repeated, and he still didn’t respond. “I was being really pushy, and I know that was hard for you.”

Five minutes.

“There’s another reason, too.” He broke the silence, he stretched out his hands, but he still didn’t look at her. Like always, he expected her to be able to follow all the threads of their conversation, no matter how they shifted and doubled back. “I like your name.”

“Aubrey?” she asked, confused, surprised.

“No. No, your last name. Thyme.”

She smiled, there.

“I like plants,” he said.

“I’m an herb.”

“I like plants, and Angel likes herbs.”

“Angel?”

“I…” He made a huffy noise. She could tell that he hadn’t meant to say that, and now he was paying the price. “That’s what I call Ezra, sometimes. Ignore it.”

No, she thought, no, I’m not going to ignore that. But she wasn’t quite sure of what to make of it.

She was starting to suspect that names mattered, to Crowley, that the naming of things and persons was something that affected him, something he used to measure what mattered to him in the world. She was starting to reconsider the significance of that moment, sessions earlier, when he told her to call him by his last name, rather than his first.

“Times up,” she said.

He let out a breath, in recognition. He nodded and shored himself up to leave, to go back into the world outside her office doors. “Right,” he said.

“See you next week?” she asked, the way she did every week.

He nodded. He stood. He moved to the door, and he opened it. He hovered, for a moment.

“See you next week, Herb,” he said, and then he left.

For Aubrey Thyme, professional therapist, that felt like a victory.
“I just don’t want to take them off in here,” he said.

It was repetitive. He had said this exact same thing almost every session for over a month, now. He said it, in sessions where otherwise neither of them made any other reference to his sunglasses. He said it, as if she kept asking him to take them off. She hadn’t, not once, but she understood that Crowley needed to act as if she had. Over and over again, he needed to repeat this conversation.

Professional therapists, like Aubrey Thyme, like to complain about representations of psychotherapy in the media. They’ve all seen The Sopranos, and Good Will Hunting, and Analyze This, and In Session. Most of them have enough personal insight to admit they thrill at seeing their profession glamorized. But they also love getting to gripe about how inaccurate these representations of the therapeutic process are. One of the most significant misrepresentations of psychotherapy was how fast it went, how easily progress was made, how meaningful the therapist’s professional insight was to helping the client heal.

As a professional therapist, Aubrey Thyme knew how little her interpretations of her clients were worth. She had, she felt, a pretty good interpretation of Crowley’s sunglasses by this point. If this were a TV show, she might confront Crowley and say something like: Don’t you get it by now? You keep saying you don’t want to take them off, because you’re scared! You’re scared, Crowley, but you want to be seen. You want me to see you!

Also, if it were a TV show, she might say something like: I’m not your mother. I won’t reject you, if you would just let me see you. She would say this, in a TV show, because TV writers couldn’t get over Freud, and fictional psychotherapists always knew more about their client’s mothers than their clients were willing to say. Of course, Aubrey Thyme suspected that Crowley had, in fact, suffered some other trauma, much earlier in his life, in some way related to his family of origin -- he displayed all the classic signs of it -- but he had never once, not once, said anything about his mother. She had never asked about her, either--because, again, she wasn’t into the whole Freudian approach to things.

In a TV show, a dramatic monologue like that would be exactly what Crowley would need to remove the sunglasses, and then he’d be healed.

Aubrey Thyme and Anthony Crowley, however, didn’t live in a TV show.

In real life, in the world they inhabited, therapeutic progress could be slow. It could be repetitive. It could be the same client, coming in week after week, displaying the exact same problem, saying the exact same words, over and over again. It could be goddamned boring. It was meaningful, because that sort of repetitive processing was what the client needed to do. On TV, the hard work of therapy was the therapist’s job; in real life, it was always the client’s.

The therapist’s job, in Aubrey Thyme’s professional opinion, was to offer the space for the client to do that hard work, to encourage the direction of that work, and to allow herself to be bored when that work was repetitive.

In other words, Aubrey Thyme was satisfied to let Crowley bore her. To a point, at least.

“Let me ask you this,” she said, trying a different tack than she had the previous time Crowley had insisted he didn’t want to remove his sunglasses, and the time before that, and before that as well. “Is it that you don’t want to take them off in here, or that you don’t want me to see you take them off?”
“What?”

“What do you think it would be like, just to take them off in here, without me seeing?”

“Don’t be stupid,” he scoffed, because Crowley still had the emotional insight of a gnat.

“Try again,” she said. She had enough of his trust, by this point, that she knew she could be a bit of a dick. She knew it worked with him.

“It would be…” He let one hand circle around in the air, as he thought. “Completely fine. It wouldn’t matter at all.”

“Yeah?” She raised her eyebrows. She rested her chin on her hand.

“I’ve had plenty of experience around humans without my glasses on, believe me,” he said.

This was another thing he did sometimes, when he wasn’t paying attention: he said humans where anyone else would say people. She kept note of it, like she kept note of his allusions to the Bible, to angels, to damnation. She still had no idea what any of it meant. That’s what kept Crowley interesting, even when the work he needed to do was so boring.

“So let’s try it,” she said, casual, shrugging, playing chicken. “I can go over there--” she pointed to the side, to the window that overlooked her building’s parking lot, “--and I’ll stay there, and you can take your sunglasses off.”

His jaw set. He tapped his fingers on the chair’s armrest. Bluff called, she thought.

“Or,” she softened, “I can go over there, and I won’t look, and you can decide whether to take your sunglasses off or not.”

He was thinking.

“Willing to humor me?”

That got him to relent, as she suspected it would. Aubrey Thyme knew Crowley well enough by this point to know that the best way to get him to do something was to present it as if it were a favor to her. “Fine,” he said.

“Okay.” She nodded. It was a very intentional nod. It was the sort of nod that said, I know this is serious, even if you won’t admit it. “Once I’m facing the window, I won’t look back until you say it’s okay.”

“Fine,” he repeated.

She gave that nod again, and then she stood. She walked over to the window. She looked out, at the cars parked below. She waited.

Aubrey Thyme relied heavily on visual information to do her job. She watched facial expressions, body posture, and she looked out for every hint about how her client was feeling and thinking. It was uncomfortable, giving up that crutch. She leaned into her other senses, especially her hearing. She could hear Crowley breathing.

“Talk to me,” she said.

“What do you want me to say?” She heard fabric move; he was shifting in the seat. “This is stupid.”
“Is it?”

He made a grunt.

“So, how about it? We’re here now. Want to try taking them off?”

She could hear him breathing. She could hear him shift. She could hear him make a sound like a sigh.

“There. Are you happy?” He said, which she guessed was his way of saying he’d done it. She breathed in deeply, to remind him how seriously she was taking this.

“Wow,” she said. She was walking a tightrope. She needed to acknowledge how momentous it was, so that he could acknowledge how momentous it was, but if she went even slightly too far with it, he’d clam up and get angry. “So. Tell me how it feels.”

“Stupid.”

“Got that. What else does it feel like?”

He didn’t respond.

“I can get you a list of emotion words, if you’d like.”

“It’s stupid how scared I feel.”

Bingo, she thought. “It feels stupid, and it feels scary. What else?”

He didn’t respond.

“Exposed, maybe?”

“Of course I feel exposed, you real proud of yourself for that brilliant insight?” he snapped, and she let him get away with it.


“Hopeless.”

She let out a meaningful breath.

“I feel like the world’s ending.” She could barely make it out, he was talking so low. She started to worry, this might be too much. “It makes no sense,” he kept on, “Why would doing this stupid thing make me feel like the world is ending again?”

She didn’t know. She didn’t know what again meant there, but she had a hunch. “Maybe this is enough for now,” she suggested, kind. “What do you think?”

“Yeah. Yeah.” There was a pause. “Okay, you can come back.”

When she turned around, she saw Crowley, and she saw her reflection in the sunglasses he wore. She saw him as the broken thing he was. She breathed deeply, and she returned to her seat.

“Thank you for sharing that with me,” she said. She thought his eyes were on her, but she wasn’t sure. He didn’t seem to have heard her. “Thank you.”
“I lost them.” His voice was flat.

“What’s that?”

“In the fire. I lost them. My sunglasses. They broke.”

_Oh, fuck, holy shit, fuck fuck fuck,_ she thought. She scrambled, she reeled, she felt very bad for having been bored earlier. “You never told me that. I didn’t know,” she tried to cover. “Tell me about that,” she said, and that was a mistake, because they were still in phase one, still working to secure safety, and she could tell that this was not a person who currently felt safe.

“I--” He started, his voice wavered, and then he broke off. He shook his head. “I had more in the car. I got another pair, that’s all.”

_Bullshit_, she thought. She had lost her professional footing. So she did what so many professional therapists end up doing, when they have lost their professional footing: she fell back on offering an interpretation. “You know… You want to know what I think?”

He looked at her.

A therapist’s interpretations aren’t worth much. Aubrey Thyme often tried not to give them. It was satisfying to give an interpretation. It was satisfying to look at another person and tell them, _See, here’s what you are, see how I know you better than you know yourself._ It usually did nothing to help. Sometimes, though, it could.

“I’m willing to bet,” she went on, cautious and soft, “when you lost your glasses in the fire… I’m willing to bet, what you felt was stupid, and scared, and exposed, and like the world was ending.”

Crowley let out a laugh which wasn’t a laugh at all. He said, “You have no idea,” and he shook.

Another thing TV portrayals of therapy get wrong is the significance of tears. Crying is important, in therapy, but how and why it’s important is never portrayed correctly. TV shows will often present it like a joke: the client sobbing into tissues while the therapist sits to the side, acting like a vestigial limb. In real life, in real therapy, in the sort of therapy Aubrey Thyme does, some of the therapist’s most important work is done while the client cries. The therapist is witness and participant, offering her empathy and compassion, using those tools to help the client feel what he needs to feel, express what he may very well not know how to express without her. When a client cried, Aubrey Thyme knew, it is her task to ensure that it was a corrective emotional experience, something through which the client could heal.

It was especially important with clients like Crowley, clients who presented with anger and deflection rather than sorrow and pain. Their tears were rare, hard for them to let out. When a client like that cried, it crystallized for her why she thought this work was meaningful, more than simply an opportunity to solve interesting puzzles. Aubrey Thyme was an atheist, but she couldn’t avoid turning to religious language to describe how much it meant, when a client like Crowley trusted her enough to cry in front of her: it was grace. She was unworthy of it, and she was blessed by it.

She knew, if she told him any of that, Crowley would laugh uproariously. She was starting to get his sense of humor. But she wouldn’t tell him that, not on her life. She would not, not at all, do anything to turn his attention away from the tears he needed to let fall.

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“Ground rules,” he said.
“Okay,” she said. She had no idea what these would be ground rules for, given that this was the first thing he had said in this session, but *ground rules*, as a general concept, was the sort of thing that a therapist like Aubrey Thyme was most definitely in favor of.

“I take them off at the end of the session, right before I leave.”

She laughed, she couldn’t help it. *Fuck off, you idiot*, she thought, with affection. “No. Crowley. Seriously? No way am I agreeing to that.”

He was disappointed. He sat further back in his chair.

“If you take them off, you’re not getting out of that seat without a very thorough and uncomfortable conversation about it.” *Ground rules.*

“Fine. Then I’m not taking them off.”

“Fine.”

“You’re a pain in the arse, Herb.”

She shrugged. He didn’t upset her. “Maybe we can work something out. Maybe not for today, but for next session. We can set up some mutually-acceptable ground rules. And next session would then be when it happened.”

He thought about that. He folded his arms in front of himself, and he sucked in a breath. “I told Ezra about you,” he said.

“Oh yeah?” She tried to sound casual and professional, but she knew she didn’t succeed. He surprised her with that on purpose, she knew he did. Sometimes, it was like he was nourished by those moments where he got her to do her job wrong.

“Mm-hmm,” he said.

“And?”

He shrugged. “He wants to meet you.”

That was interesting. It was interesting to her because joint sessions can be very useful, especially in cases of trauma. Later in the process, once they had done more work with his trauma narrative, it could be very useful for him to share it with such a close friend, especially given the role that friend had played in the traumatic experience, itself. It was also interesting to her because she would get to see who this Ezra person was. She’d be lying to herself, if she denied some fascination in what sort of person could get Crowley to use the pet name, ‘Angel,’ unironically.

“Don’t take it personally,” he drawled, and she realized she hadn’t given a response. “He wants to meet everyone. He *likes* people.”

“Oh ha,” she said. She nodded. She was still reasoning through what would be in her client’s best interest, working hard to separate that from her own professionally-unwarranted curiosity. “And what do you think about that?”

“I think, he stays in London, you stay in New York.”

This was another one of those mysteries about her client she could not solve. He seemed to defy basic geography. He dropped enough references to make clear that he did, indeed, spend most of
his time in England. She couldn’t imagine the cost of so many trans-Atlantic flights, but he clearly had the means. What really made her mind buckle was the exorbitant amount of time he must spend, flying back and forth.

Here, she supposed, was an explanation: it was worth the cost, for him, to make sure he never ran into her except on his terms. She would have been wrong, she supposed, to expect anything less dramatic and over-the-top from him.

“There might be a time, later, when it would be useful for him to join us,” she said. “But it would be entirely up to you, only if you wanted to.”

He shrugged.

“Is he going to pressure you into letting him come?”

“So what sort of ground rules would you find mutually-acceptable?” He said. So, apparently they were back on that.

“Well…” She thought about it. “It should happen at the start of the session. Sorry, but that’s what I think.”

“What if you wanted to end early?”

She scowled at him. He still expected her to run screaming. “I won’t,” she said.

“That a promise?” He asked, and it almost sounded mocking. She couldn’t put her finger on what it was, but there was a strange tinge to it, like he was walking her into a trap she couldn’t perceive.

“Sure,” she said, because despite the way he was making her feel right now, she couldn’t see any reason not to offer this promise. She was a professional, after all.

“Fine,” he sighed out, and now he sounded really disappointed. He shifted in his seat again, leaning forward, closer to her. “You should be more careful who you make promises to, Aubrey Thyme.”

She could not understand what had just happened. She could not understand what she had done to lose ‘Herb.’ She knew, however, if she asked, he wouldn’t give an answer. “What would you need to feel safe?” She asked, trying to get back on track.

He shrugged. He was agitated.

“If you’d like,” she tried again, “We could practice today. We could try it out, do everything, just like we would next time, only without you actually taking them off.”

“Maybe,” he said, fidgeting and looking around. “Maybe. His name’s not actually Ezra, you know.”


“Ezra. That’s not actually his name. That’s just what I told you.”

She had almost forgotten how much of a liar he was. She had almost let that slip her mind. She felt like a hack. “Do you want to tell me what his name really is?”

“No.”
“Okay.”

“It’s Aziraphale.”

*God damn!,* she thought again. “Az-ra--what was that?”

“A-zir-a-phale,” he sounded it out, slower. “One name. All one word. Aziraphale.”

“That’s an unusual name,” she said, stupidly.

He shrugged. “Not where we’re from.”

Aubrey Thyme spent a month, once, touring Europe. It included a weekend in England. She was pretty certain *Aziraphale* is not, in any way, a common name there.

“Well, thank you for telling me the truth,” she said, even more stupidly.

He shrugged. “So, we practice, huh? Just… Play act?”

“Um, yes.” She nodded. His deflection tactics were so obvious, in retrospect, it annoyed her when they worked. But, at least, she could see how it had benefited the therapeutic process this time. It had given him time to think things through.

By the end of the session, they had their ground rules.

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*Cat eyes,* she thought. That was how she saw them: *cat eyes.*

It would only be later, after the session had ended, when she was writing up her notes, that she would realize her mistake, that she would recontextualize the tattoo on the side of his face, the occasional speech impediment he tried to hide, and the thematic choices he made with his accessories. Later, she would groan and rethink so much of what she understood about him. But for now, in the session, what she saw was that he had cat eyes.

He had cat eyes, and they were very, very angry cat eyes.

She didn’t say anything. This was one of their ground rules. He had said it was alright if she screamed, but he didn’t want her to comment on them. So long as his eyes were uncovered, she wouldn’t talk.

So she didn’t. She also hadn’t screamed, and she could tell that mattered. They were unnerving to look at, in particular because of how much anger they contained, but they were also beautiful. Another ground rule he had insisted on: she was not, at any point, to say that they were beautiful. She was not to compliment them in any way.

It was not easy to keep eye contact with him, given how angry he was. It was hard to look at such angry eyes and keep her composure. It mattered, though. This was what all her professional experience was for, to maintain her composure in moments like this. And, furthermore, Aubrey Thyme understood that her client wasn’t angry at her. She understood, she really did. He was angry at himself, he was angry at his eyes, he was angry that he was so scared.

Anthony Crowley, at this moment, was terrified of Aubrey Thyme in a way, she suspected, he was almost never terrified of anything. He was terrified of what she could do to him, how she could break him, how she could let him down and reject him. He was terrified, and he was angry that he
was terrified. But Aubrey Thyme would not let him down. She wouldn’t.

They had settled on a timer. He had originally suggested a full minute, timed out, of eye contact. She had warned him, however, that a full minute of uninterrupted eye contact, especially without any talking, could feel like an eternity. There had been some rounds of bargaining, which concluded with them agreeing to a total of 43 seconds. Now, she could tell, from the tenor of the anger in those eyes, she should have pushed harder for less time. He was in pain.

The timer dinged. He put the glasses back on. She took a deep breath, and he did too.

“Well,” she said. He sighed out.

“You didn’t scream.”

“I didn’t run away.”

“You should have.”

This wasn’t the first time he had said something like this. This was a defense mechanism of his: he would crawl behind this image he had of himself, as some terrifying and dangerous person, whenever he felt too vulnerable. It was her professional opinion that there would be a time, in the future, when she would call him on it. But not now.

“So,” she said, holding out her hands as if to say, _you know the ground rules_. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“I’m thinking you should have run.”

She nodded. “And?”

“I’m thinking I want to take a nap.”

_Third time’s a charm_, she thought. “And?”

“I’m thinking it wasn’t that bad.”

“Not that bad,” she repeated. He shrugged and said nothing, so she pushed: “Thank you for trusting me.”

He shrugged again and said nothing, so she pushed again: “Crowley. Thank you.”

He mumbled something which she interpreted as _no big deal._

“What’s it like to trust me?” she asked.

Something played across his face, but she couldn’t read it. He was uncomfortable, and he was hiding something from her. He was always hiding something from her, he was a liar after all, but now, she thought, he was feeling bad about it.

“There are some things you don’t know about me,” he said. He sounded cautious and frightened. He sounded like a child who has been slapped for asking for supper.

“I know, Crowley,” she said. She soothed. She reassured. She smiled. “I’ve known from day one.”

“You wouldn’t like me if you really knew me,” he said.
“Crowley,” she said this like she was calling out to him. She moved to try to catch his eyes, even through his glasses. She wanted to make sure he saw that she was smiling, that there was warmth in her smile, that it was warmth intended just for him. “I do know you. I see you. I know you.”

He didn’t believe her. Not thoroughly. Not entirely. But, she could see, he believed her enough. Not much, but enough.
Aubrey Thyme and her client, Anthony Crowley, struggle to find a way forward, when there is so much he isn't willing to tell her.

“I think it’s about time that we started getting serious, talking about the fire,” she said.

“Really?” He looked amused. “Because I was starting to worry you’d grow old and die before we got around to that.”

“You’re a real charmer,” she deadpanned.

There are a number of different names for the second phase in the tri-phasic model of trauma therapy. It is referred to as Remembrance and Mourning, or Reprocessing, or Memory Processing, or so on. The goal of this stage is to confront the traumatic memories, to make sense of them, to get them to have less power over one’s life. Neurologically, a traumatic experience disrupts one’s memory processing systems. Metaphorically, the traumatic memory sits in the brain like a constantly-recurring actuality, linguistically inexpressible and incomprehensible, all-consuming. It is the goal of this phase to tease the traumatic memory out of its stuck location, to turn it into something expressible and understandable, and in so doing to get it to give up its hold on the trauma survivor’s neurological processes.

It was, in Aubrey Thyme’s professional opinion, a phase best built around the telling of stories. It is through narrative, after all, that life makes sense: any single moment in a person’s life is only interpretable through the context of every other. And so, when transitioning a client into the second phase of trauma therapy, Aubrey Thyme thought it was important to start talking to clients, not just about the trauma experienced, but about the whole of their life surrounding that experience.

“How do you feel,” she asked, “about the prospect of talking more about the fire with me?”

“On with it,” he said, and he made a gesture that meant hurry up, let’s move along now. “Get it over with.”

“It’s something I’d want to take really slowly.”

If there was one thing that Aubrey Thyme understood about Crowley, it was that going slow may as well have been physically painful for him. This was not unusual for trauma survivors like him: the constant rush of adrenaline often felt more comfortable, for trauma survivors, than the equanimity of sitting still. She had tried explaining the neurology behind trauma responses like this to Crowley in the past, but it hadn’t gone well. He had laughed about it. He called neuroscience cute, which she had found annoyingly presumptuous. But she had let it drop. No sense beating a dead horse.

“So how would we go about it?” he asked.

“Well…” She let herself sound thoughtful. “There are a number of different ways to go about it. We’ll probably try a variety of different things, to see what works best for you. But I had one idea,
I wanted to run past you.”

She waited for him to express interest. She waited long enough that finally he did: the gesture again, *get on with it.*

“We could write a book.”

He laughed, loud and explosive. “A book!”

“It’s something I’ve done with a lot of clients.” What she did not say is that it was something she primarily did with clients much younger than him, children and adolescents. “We’re talking about a fire in a bookshop. Seems appropriate, doesn’t it? We could write out a book, about the fire.”

“I don’t like books,” he said, because of course he didn’t.

“Aziraphale likes books,” she said, because she knew what she was doing.

“What would we say in this book?” he asked, because, again, she had known what she was doing.

“We’d write it out, like a story. Beginning, middle, and end, and we’d have the last chapter focus on thoughts about the future. We’d title it, make a cover page, table of contents, everything.”

He opened his mouth to say something, but then he stopped himself. He had been having a grand time, moments ago, but now he looked confused. “What would count as the beginning?”

“That would be up to you. What do you think counts as the beginning?”

“The word,” he said, and she could tell this was one of his private jokes she wasn’t supposed to understand. She waited, because she knew by now he was often his most honest after he got to tell one of his private jokes. “I have no idea what the beginning would be.”

“Well…” She hesitated. “Later on, we can develop a full timeline. For now, though, what was happening, before the fire?”

“The world was ending.”

“How so?”

His face did something complicated, and then he looked frustrated. “I have no idea how to talk to you about this.”

“That’s okay,” she reassured. She nodded for him. “We’ll go slowly, remember? We’ll work it out.”

“No.” He shook his head. He was thinking, and he looked even more frustrated. “No, I mean, I literally have no idea how to talk to you about this.”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

Now he looked angry.

“Talk to me, Crowley,” she said softly.

He didn’t. Instead, he did that thing where he stretched out in his seat as if he had no spine. He flexed his fingers out, and he frowned. “We had a fight.”
“You and Aziraphale?”

He nodded.

“And that was the world ending?”

“May as well have been.” He shrugged.

“What were you fighting about?”

“About how the world was ending.”

You piece of shit, she thought, and she leaned back in her seat. She felt like giving up. “Okay, let’s step back. What do you mean, when you say the world was ending?”

He grumbled something which didn’t amount to words.

“Can you please clarify for me, what were you and Aziraphale fighting about?”

He sighed and he twisted and he made faces. “I wanted him to go somewhere. He didn’t want to go.”

“And you fought about that?”

“Yeah.”

“Where did you want him to go?”

“Alpha Centauri.”

She sighed out. She pinched the shallow of her nose. “Okay, Crowley. I get it. I get it.”

He set his jaw and watched her. Her only consolation, he looked just as miserable as she felt.

“If you’re ever not ready for something I bring up, you can just say so,” she said.

His jaw worked, but he didn’t say anything.

“Talk to me, Crowley.”

He didn’t.

The rest of the session didn’t go well.

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“What if,” he suggested one day, “I wrote out the book, but I didn’t share it with you?”

In Aubrey Thyme’s professional opinion, that was not a good idea. “Do you think that would be helpful for you?”

He shrugged. He looked miserable.

“Would you actually write it, if you knew I wouldn’t know whether you did or not?”

He thought. “Probably not.”
“Well, then,” she said.

“I could write it, and then redact it.”

“Redact it?”

“Remove the parts I don’t want you to see.”

“We could try that.” She nodded, amenable even though it also seemed like a bad idea. “Could we talk about what the table of contents would look like?”

“I would redact that.”

“Oh-huh.”

“I’m sensing some doubt in you, Herb.”

He wasn’t wrong.

***

Setbacks are a regular part of the therapeutic process. A professional like Aubrey Thyme knew to expect them and to treat them like an opportunity. When a client was resistant, or started to pull away, or showed hesitancy where previously they had not, that meant the work was getting somewhere important. It meant that the client was confronting the issues they really needed to confront. Night is darkest before dawn, and all that.

With regard to her client, Crowley, Aubrey Thyme did not feel like the recent setbacks were an opportunity. Something was wrong, but she could not understand what. He was distant in a way he had not been previously, not even back when they first started. She felt exasperated, constantly, working with him. She was swimming in exasperation.

She knew it was her professional duty to interrogate this feeling of exasperation. She had to evaluate what it meant about herself, her work, and her own therapeutic needs, that she felt frustrated and annoyed by Crowley’s antics. It was not, after all, the nature of her job to allow her own, personal emotions to overwhelm her professional capacities. It was a sign that something was wrong--wrong with her, specifically.

It would be one thing, she thought, if he simply were lying. She could handle lying. She could work with lying. But the problem, so far as she could perceive it, is that he didn’t seem to want to be lying anymore. He wanted to be truthful. She could *feel* how much he wanted to tell her the truth, like a suffocating cloud each time he walked into her office. And yet, he wouldn’t. Somehow, she still hadn’t managed to make the truth possible for him.

She didn’t know what she was doing wrong.

The good news, so far as she saw it, was that whatever mistakes she was making could be corrected. This is a central belief shared by many professional therapists, like her: honest interaction within the therapeutic setting can undo past harms; the unflinching acceptance of compassionate truth-telling can mend a frayed relationship, no matter what. Even the worst fracture in the therapeutic alliance could be healed, with enough honesty, compassion, and hard work.

So long as her client, Anthony Crowley, kept coming back, there was an opportunity for her to stop fucking things up so badly. She just had to figure out how.
“I’d like to talk to you today about something you said a while ago,” she said.

“Well, that’s a good way to get me to clam up,” he said, and she took that to be a good sign. It may be the same half-assed assery as always, but it also was an acknowledgement that he had feelings, that he was affected by what she did and said. That was more than he sometimes gave her.

“A while ago,” she said, and she could have been more specific about the timing, but she had decided it would be best to leave it vague, “you told me, if I really knew you, I wouldn’t like you.”

“Yep.”

“That’s what I’d like to talk about.”

“Figured.”

She waited. He started bobbing one knee up and down. He tapped his fingers against his armrests. Fifteen seconds.

“Well?” He finally gave in. “You want to talk about it, then talk about it.”

“Actually,” she said, cool and calm, a purposeful antidote to his agitation. “I was hoping to hear more from you on that matter.”

He groaned out. Good old theatrical Crowley, she thought.

“What do you want me to say?” he asked.

“Whatever comes to mind, whatever you want to say.”

“That’s what Freud always said.”

“You’re not going to distract me with that.”

He sneered at her, and she interpreted it to be a friendly expression. She waited. She smiled. She modeled the calm and relaxed posture that she wanted him to be able to adopt. Half a minute, and he settled back in his seat.

“I have. Done. Things. in the past,” he said, with a careful emphasis.

Aubrey Thyme heard that emphasis, and she decided to be very careful with her response. There were a number of different ways she could have responded, and each of the potential responses could have had therapeutic merit under different circumstances. She could have joked: Geez, I didn’t ask for a whole novel. That may have been appropriate, if she wanted to build rapport. She could have implored: Keep going, you’re doing great. That may have been appropriate, if she thought he needed support. She could have asked for clarification: What sorts of things? If she wanted more facts.

But, in this specific moment, with this specific client, who she knew to be a very angry person, with access to considerable wealth, with a facial tattoo, and with everything else she did and didn’t know about him, Aubrey Thyme’s mind skittered to her legal responsibilities.

“Before you go on,” she said, maintaining that smooth and cool tone, hoping she didn’t sound rushed, worried that this may ruin his meager attempt at truth-telling. “Let me remind you about when I’m legally required to break confidentiality… If you remember--”
“Oh, shh!” He cut her off with an annoyed glare. “I remember. I signed the informed consent, didn’t I?” He had, that first session, after their conversation about Oedipal complexes and grounding techniques. The way he had signed it was still something she wondered about—but signed it, he had. “None of that’s relevant. If you want me to talk, then let me talk.”

“Oh, shh!” He cut her off with an annoyed glare. “I remember. I signed the informed consent, didn’t I?” He had, that first session, after their conversation about Oedipal complexes and grounding techniques. The way he had signed it was still something she wondered about—but signed it, he had. “None of that’s relevant. If you want me to talk, then let me talk.”

“Okay,” she said. She nodded so as to say, *you have my full attention*. And she waited.

“Done. Things,” he repeated, with that same emphasis.

She nodded again.

Seeing that she was listening, he leaned back even further in his seat. He rested his neck on the back of his chair, and he gazed up to the ceiling. He started talking.

“I made a decision. For people. Or, well, I pushed them towards the decision, when they didn’t know any better. An irrevocable decision. It wasn’t mine to make. It was wrong. Well--maybe. It all worked out in the end, I think. I’m proud of it, actually. And I’d do it again, all things considered. But--look, in retrospect, I didn’t go about it the way I would have liked.”

“I see,” she said, quietly, even though she didn’t.

“I’m worried about doing the same thing again.”

“Making decisions for people?” she tried.

“Smaller scale, this time. Well--” He shifted, still looking up. “I guess that depends on how you count. Ramifications would be smaller, that I’m certain of. But the actual act--”

“Crowley.”

This happened sometimes. He was easily distracted. But he very rarely took offense to her recentering his attention. He turned his gaze back down from the ceiling, to look at her.

“What I’m saying is, there are certain things you might be better off not knowing.” He made a gesture with his hands, a gesture she recognized as one of her own. It was a gesture that said, *here’s all I have to offer.*

“Is that the general ‘you’ or the specific ‘you’?” she asked.

“Both fit.” He shrugged. “There are certain things you might be better off not knowing.”

Aubrey Thyme thought about that, and she frowned.

She had been trained with the scientist-practitioner model. This meant that she had been trained to understand herself, professionally, as both a scientist and a practitioner. She was a practitioner in that she practiced: she worked with clients, she applied psychological theory to specific cases. She was a scientist in that she formed hypotheses and tested them: she accepted psychological theory only to the extent that it cohered with empirical data, and she took responsibility for revising her assumptions and beliefs whenever they conflicted with the data available.

But there was another sense, a deeper sense, in which Aubrey Thyme understood herself to be a scientist. Aubrey Thyme believed in truth. She believed in the pursuit of it. She believed in its power to heal and renew: she practiced, after all, by helping individuals recognize and accept the truths of their lives. She believed in its *goodness*. She understood knowledge as valuable in itself, as an inherently worthy goal.
This meant that Aubrey Thyme, as someone who identified with the scientific assumptions from which her profession was built, was not well suited to accept that there could be knowledge better off unknown.

“I don’t believe that,” she said.

“You wouldn’t,” he muttered. “That’s the whole point. You don’t know what you don’t know.”

“You’re trying to protect me,” she summarized, “by hiding yourself from me.”

“I’m trying not to make a decision for you that by all rights should be yours alone to make.”

“So let me make it.” She shrugged. It was a nonchalant shrug. It was nonchalant because, for Aubrey Thyme, the decision to accept knowledge was always one that could be made nonchalantly. “My decision. I take responsibility for it.”

He didn’t look impressed.

“No, seriously,” she tried again, although her tone hadn’t turned less flippant. “This is my job, you know that, right? This is what I do. It’s what I signed up for.”

He shook his head, not accepting her reasons.

“If it’s my decision to make, then let me make it.”

She wasn’t convincing him. She wasn’t making a dent in his thought processes. He just kept shaking his head, and she was starting to feel annoyed, disrespected. Aubrey Thyme was a professional, and she didn’t appreciate someone diminishing her professional capacity for handling the truth.

“Not accepting someone’s decision is the same as making it for them, you know,” she said.

He looked off to the side. He looked miserable in the very specific way he regularly looked miserable, these days. He didn’t say anything.

“There is nothing you could tell me about yourself that deserves this sort of anguish,” she said, and she believed it. She said it to try to get him to believe it, too.

She waited. She waited more. She kept her eyes on him. She kept an imploring expression on her face, in case he looked back at her. He didn’t. He sucked on his teeth.

“Let me do my job, Crowley.”

“You don’t know what you don’t know,” he mumbled again.

She wasn’t satisfied. She risked pushing once more. “What would it take for you to trust me?”

He let out a breath, and at least he looked at her. “I’ll think about it,” he said.

***

“We’re going to talk about religion today,” he said, first thing, before he was even seated, at their next session.

“Okay,” she said, accepting that. It hadn’t been what she had planned, but it seemed fitting, given the emphasis on truth and knowledge in their previous discussion. “What about religion?”
“Yours, specifically,” he said. “I want to know why you’re an atheist.”

“I still want to know what made you think I’m an atheist,” she said, playing poker.

“Come off it.” He wasn’t impressed. “Why are you an atheist?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“I just do. Why?”

“Not good enough.”

He made a dissatisfied noise, kind of like a hiss. “It matters. To me. I need to know.”

“Do you? Explain why.”

“It’ll change things.”

“How?”

“It just will.”

“How?”

“It juggles—” His speech impediment was noticeable, and she knew that happened when he was worked up. He twitched his head to the side, and then he came back, clearly having decided to change tactics. He took his sunglasses off, and he looked her straight in the eye. “Aubrey Thyme, tell me why you are an atheist.”

So far as tactics go, that was a pretty good one, she had to admit. It surprised her, and she worked to keep that from showing. “Anthony Crowley, tell me why you care.”

He couldn’t hide without his sunglasses. His eyes were full of frustration and obstinacy, but also fear and hope. “Will. You. Pleassssse. Trussssst me.”

Sometimes, he could look exactly like someone who should never, ever be trusted.

She had less than a split second to decide how to respond, whether to continue the stand-off, or capitulate, or try to distract. She could feel that this was a significant moment, that the direction she took could reverberate throughout their future sessions, changing the dynamic between them. It mattered, what he had said, and it would matter how she responded, right now, in this instant, authentically. There wasn’t time for her to make a reasoned judgment call, to formulate hypotheses and evaluate them on the basis of their therapeutic merit. She had to rely on her senses and intuition, on her gut feelings, and she could only hope that her many years of training and experience had left them skillfully honed enough that they would not lead her astray.

“Okay, okay.” She raised up her hands, placating and kind. “Okay, Crowley.” She smiled, a little. “We can talk about this.”

He stilled. He didn’t put his sunglasses back on, but he moved his eyes to the side. He waited. She waited, too, for a moment, for him to calm.

She would model for him honest discourse.

“I guess I just don’t think it makes sense,” she said.
“What doesn’t?”

“The whole idea.” She shrugged. “This isn’t something I’m too comfortable discussing.”

“What doesn’t make sense?” he asked again, insistent.

“It’s hard to explain. The whole idea of a god, of heaven and hell. Evil, everything. This is just my opinion.”

“Evil doesn’t make sense to you?” He sounded like she was talking nonsense. It made her worry she was, in fact, talking nonsense.

“What’s on your mind, Crowley?”

“Why doesn’t evil make sense to you?”

Aubrey Thyme was a very thoughtful woman. She was a woman who had chosen a profession where her entire job was to think about thoughts. She was a woman who put a lot of thought into her thoughts, too. But this didn’t mean that all of her thoughts were entirely, thoroughly, carefully expressible. Part of the reason why Aubrey Thyme was uncomfortable talking about religion was that, by its very nature, it was supposed to go beyond what was expressible.

She said it as best as she could: “I just think we only use the word ‘evil’ to describe what we can’t understand.”

“Huh,” he said. He looked thoughtful.

“I think all questions deserve answers.”

“Uh-huh,” he said. He nodded a little. He toyed with the sunglasses in his hands. She could see his eyes dart about slightly. He was reasoning through something, she just didn’t know what.

“That’s just my opinion. My own view. That’s all.”

“I get it.” He kept nodding, kept thinking. He put his sunglasses back on. “Yeah, I get it.”

Alright,” she said, because she didn’t know what else to say. She gave him a moment to continue working through whatever thoughts he had in his mind, and then she prompted, “I’d really like to talk a bit about what’s going on, here.”

“Ooh, would love to,” he said. “But I’m afraid we’re out of time.”

“What?” They had just started. She knew they had just started. All of her years of experience had left her with an internal clock that was precisely calibrated to measure 50-minute increments. And that internal clock was very, very certain that not more than ten minutes could have passed. She looked to confirm with the external clock on her wall, and she was dismayed to see it agreed with Crowley. “How did we--”

“Gotta go, see you next week,” he said, before she could make sense of things. He was out the door, even, before she could tear her scowl away from her clock.

She felt disoriented the whole rest of the day.

***

He looked terrified, reverent, hesitant and unsure of himself. From the moment she first laid eyes
on him for this session, she could tell that he was someone with a plan, someone who was dead-set on enacting it.

“This,” he said, with careful flourish, ”is a symbol.”

She nodded. She accepted it. She regarded the symbol he had set between them. “It’s an apple,” she said.

That annoyed him. “Yes, it’s an apple. The apple is the symbol.”

In Aubrey Thyme’s office, the two chairs were the primary focus, but there was other furniture in the room as well. There were end tables next to the chairs, on which she put tissues and stress balls and other accoutrements. When Crowley had entered the room, he had gone straight to the end table next to the chair where he normally sat. He had emptied it off, gently placing all the goods on the ground, off to the side. Then he had pulled the table around, so it was in front of his chair, between it and her own.

He had sat down, then. He had watched, waited, for her to sit down, too. He had given himself an impromptu stage, and he had waited for his audience to be ready.

Once she was sitting, she saw that he was holding an apple, although she hadn’t seen him holding it before. He held it carefully, like it was precious or maybe dangerous. He watched it, as he set it down on the table between them. And then he had told her it was a symbol.

“What does it symbolize?” she asked.

“What do apples always symbolize?” he retorted.

“Anything can symbolize anything,” she said.

He let out a breath. She was frustrating him, and he had a short fuse today. “Work with me here. What do apples symbolize?”

“What’s this about, Crowley?”

“All questions deserve answers, that’s what you believe. What do apples symbolize?”

The best consumers of therapy are, themselves, therapists. Aubrey Thyme was no exception. She had worked for years with her own therapist, in the past. In particular, Aubrey Thyme, as a client, had spent a considerable amount of time working on her, as she referred to them, control issues. She had explored, through her therapy, how those control issues had played a role in her choice of profession. She felt in control, when she was the therapist, when she invited others into her office, when she could see them, and ask questions, and expect them to answer. She felt in control, when she was the one who knew the script and who established the rules.

Of course, the therapeutic encounter is not actually about maintaining control. It was not her job to be in control. Much of her job, instead, was to give up control, to allow the client to take the reigns to his own recovery. She understood that, she accepted that, and she had worked very hard to make sure she could be the person she needed to be, to give up her desire for control when it served her client’s therapeutic ends.

This didn’t mean it was easy for her. It was challenging. And, she knew, it meant that she was most at risk of failing, as a professional, when she felt control being wrested from her.

That’s how she felt in this moment: Crowley was wresting control away from her. She didn’t like
it. She despised it, even, and it left her wary. It left her wary because, she knew, it pitted her professional impulses against her own personal inclinations. She had no idea whether she actually should insist on gaining control back from him, or whether that was just what her control issues were trying to make her believe. Crowley was leaving her completely decentered.

He made a hissing sound, bringing her out of her internal interrogation and back to the external one of his own devising. “Herb. Apples. Work with me.”

She frowned at him, purposefully. “Knowledge.”

“Uh-huh.” He nodded as if to say, keep going.

“Knowledge of good and evil.”

He kept nodding.

“Original sin.”

“Yep. Yep. Exactly. That’s exactly what it symbolizes.” He nodded in a different way, a more personal way, a way that indicated that his plan, whatever it was, was moving forward. “Now. Tell me. Why?”

“You tell me why.”

“I will. After you.”

She shook her head. “I don’t understand, Crowley.”

“Humor me, Herb,” he said, looking at her from behind those sunglasses, throwing out all the big guns to get her to relent. “I’m always humoring you, so return the favor. Just this once.”

She sighed. She would relent. But she wouldn’t relent too quickly, because that would be giving him too much. She watched him, and she waited. She waited right until she could tell, from the look of him, that he was about to become splinters.

“It’s from the Bible,” she said, unamused. “Don’t act like you don’t know.”

“The story of the apple,” he said. He looked down at the apple between them, and then he looked back up at her. “Tell it to me.”

“What?”

“Tell me. The story of the apple, tell it to me.”

“You serious?”

“Yessssss,” he said, and there was something in his voice that was unusual, that was different. It wasn’t his tone, but something else, something deeper, like it was something she wasn’t hearing but instead could just feel. It was something that left all her unresolved control issues screaming at her that she shouldn’t let him boss her around, but also left her confident in ignoring them.

“Garden of Eden,” she said, even and low, as Crowley listened. As she spoke, he tilted his head to the side, as if the angle helped him concentrate on her all the more closely. “Adam and Eve have the run of the whole place. They name the animals. God tells them they’re welcome to whatever they want, except for one tree. They can’t eat fruit from the tree of knowledge. But Eve goes and eats some anyway, and then she gets Adam to eat some too. So, God kicks them out.”
Crowley’s jaw became slack. His brow was furrowed, hard. She couldn’t guess what his eyes would look like, behind those glasses.

“You--” he started. He stopped. He started again. “You forgot something.”

“I did?”

“Yeah, I’d say you did,” he said, nodding emphatically. His voice was low, like he couldn’t decide whether to be amused or offended. “Something important.”

“Huh,” she said, exploring his face, exploring her memory to try to figure out what she forgot.

He got impatient. He reached up to his face and ripped the sunglasses off. He stared at her, eyes pointedly wide.

Oh, she thought. Oh. Oh shit. She thought that because, instantly, she thought she understood.

She understood, first, what he meant. She had in fact forgotten something important about the story, something really important. She had forgotten the snake. The story couldn’t be told correctly, not without the snake. But that wasn’t all she understood, in this moment, as Crowley stared at her pointedly—at least, all that she thought she understood.

Instantaneously, as Crowley purposefully stared at her, she had flashes of insight, or what she took to be insight, in the form of imagined perceptions. She imagined seeing a young child, a young boy, who was neglected or abused by his family of origin, who had a strange eye condition and an ironic speech impediment. She imagined this young child being given a book, the Bible, or perhaps a children’s Bible with large illustrations, and being told it was the word of God, the truth, the one source for morality and goodness. She imagined this child seeking in its pages any face he could identify with, he could see himself in, and finding only one, only a snake, only the evil crawling creature who had, supposedly, ruined paradise.

She imagined this boy growing into a teenager, angry and scared and alone, leaning into this identification with humanity’s original tempter. She imagined him, at his eighteenth birthday, or maybe earlier, or maybe later, finding a tattoo artist and insisting on the snake drawn permanently on his face, right on his temple, so that even when his eyes were hidden he could parade his insistent rebellion to the world. He could hide behind villainy, he could be safe that way. He could make himself be a snake, the snake, and through that be protected.

She imagined all of this. She imagined this onto Crowley, onto his past. Instantaneously, she felt the spiderweb strands in her mind, the ones that had been poorly aligned and confused, regarding her understanding of Crowley, shift and snap into a new shape, a new order, a coherent picture.

This, she thought, this was everything she had been missing. This was everything she had been failing to understand. It explained his private jokes, it explained his constant allusions to the Bible, it explained why he slipped into calling people humans. It explained the whole of him, she thought. It solved the puzzle of the broken being before her, who had been confounding her for so long. It gave her the pieces she needed, she felt, to push past his resistances.

That’s what she thought, in that moment, as Crowley stared at her with his insistent eyes.

“You’re right. You’re right.” Her voice was quiet now, soothing now. Because she understood, or she thought she did. She felt in control, again. “I forgot the snake. There’s a snake. The snake tempts Eve. That’s why she ate the apple.”

“Yes,” he said. He nodded. He broke his stare. He leaned back in his seat. He seemed more at rest,
but not sated. “That’s the story.”

She waited a moment, to let him calm, to let herself calm, and then she said, “Wow.” She said that, because she had said it before in meaningful moments. She knew he would understand it. It meant that she understood. It meant that she was listening. “I… Thank you. Thank you for--”

“What would you have done?” She was in his sights again.

“What?”

“Had you been there. What would you have done?”

“Well, I’d have eaten the apple.”

“Of course, you would have!” He snorted out a laugh, and she was satisfied to see a smile dancing in his eyes. “Never would’ve doubted that about you. Not what I meant. What would you have done, if you had been the snake?”

“The snake?” she repeated, giving herself a chance to think.

“Uh huh,” he said.

From the moment they had first meant, Anthony Crowley had been testing her. Most of those tests, in her professional opinion, were complete bullshit. Here, again, he was testing her. But this time, she thought, he had found a test that actually mattered. He had found a test that she actually wanted to make sure she passed.

Crowley, she now understood, identified with the snake of Eden. And, if she could identify with the snake of Eden, too, then that meant that she could identify with him.

She would not lie to him. Crowley had given her something precious, today, and she would not destroy it with a lie. She wanted to pass this test, but she wanted to do it authentically, earnestly, honestly.

She wanted to deserve it.

“Honestly?” She tapped her fingers against her armrest. “I’d have blown up the wall.”

His face stretched into a grin, wide, surprised, affectionate. She had passed, she could tell.

“That so?” he said.

“It always seemed pretty ridiculous to me, having a giant wall anyway. And, if you blow it up, there’s no way to keep Adam and Eve out. They can do whatever they want.”

“No dynamite yet, and there’s a guard, anyway,” he said. She could see it in his eyes: he was downright tickled. “All you’ve got to work with is a tree, and some apples. What would you have done?”

“Same as what’s in the story, sure. Give them the apple.” She shrugged.

“Even though there’s no way they could understand the stakes beforehand?”

She shrugged again.

“Even though you can’t ask them if it’s really what they’d want?”
She shrugged for the third time. “What’s the point of living, if you don’t get to understand anything?”

She was gratified by how open his smile was. He was here, with her, and he seemed happy. He reached for the apple, picked it up, and started twirling it in his hands. “Okay,” he said. “So, we’re agreed then.”

“Sure.” She smiled.

“Ground rules.”

“What?”

“For next time.” He nodded, now. He settled into a more somber expression. “I’m going to be honest with you. Next time. So, let’s work out the ground rules, for how it will go.”

“Okay, sounds good.”

“It might be unpleasant,” he warned.

“I can handle the truth,” she said.

“No, none of that.” He shot her a friendly glare. “You start impersonating Jack Nicholson, and I’m calling the whole thing off.”

“Fine, fine.”

“And, remember, you can always run,” he said.

“I won’t.”

“Don’t promise.” He looked at her carefully. “This time. Do not make that promise.”

“Okay, fine.”

“And, if you do run, take however long you want, before you come back.”

“This is my office, Crowley.”

“Contingencies, we’re just working out contingencies.” He started tossing the apple up, from one hand to the other. “If you run, take however long as you want, and I’ll be here when you get back.” Something complicated passed by his face. He tossed the apple again. “I’ll leave if you ask me to. That’s a promise I am making to you. But I won’t leave, unless you ask.”

“You’re taking this very seriously.”

He looked at her. “I’m trying to do it right.”

She didn’t know what that meant, not precisely. But she thought about the gift he had given her this day, or that she thought he had given her, and she thought she understood him better than she ever had before. She nodded. “Thank you for trusting me.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” he said, warning again, but there was a softness to it. He seemed to remember the apple in his hands, and he held it out. “You want this?” he asked.

“Naw, thanks though.”
It took the whole rest of the hour for them to work out ground rules that Crowley found acceptable. After a while, Crowley ate the apple himself.
Aubrey Thyme struggles to understand the insight her client, Crowley, has given her.

The kindest man she had ever laid eyes on was currently sitting in her waiting area.

She was nervous, and that didn’t help matters. She had entered the waiting area to collect Crowley, and she was nervous because she knew this session would be challenging and important, no matter what happened. She was nervous, and so she had put extra effort into preparing herself for working with him. She had prepared herself to open her office door to the waiting area, to see him sprawled out and antsy, and to invite him into her office. She had also prepared herself to open the door, to see no one in her waiting area, and to accept that Crowley had no-showed on her. What she had not prepared herself for, given that she had no reason to anticipate this as a possibility, was opening her door to see Crowley sprawled out, sitting next to the kindest man she had ever laid eyes on.

She had not prepared for this man, the kindest man she had ever laid eyes on, to have his eyes on her. As soon as she had entered the waiting area, he was looking straight at her. It was as if he had been looking at her before she had even entered the room. It was as if he was looking into her, through her, and she couldn’t stop it. It made her want to coil up tight and small, to hide from him, to escape him, to avoid all the kindness that those eyes were pushing at her.

He smiled at her, and it was the warmest, most loving smile she had ever seen, and she felt her stomach clench.

“You!” Crowley said, and he must have stood up, because now he was blocking her view of the kindest man she had ever laid eyes on. “Don’t you talk to him.”

“What?” she croaked. She was relieved, because she had been trapped by the kindest man’s piercing blue eyes, but she still felt disoriented, out of sorts. This was not how she would have wanted to feel, before a session that had the potential to be so momentous for her client.

“And you!” Crowley said, swinging his head back around to address the kindest man. “Stop it!” he hissed, low, in the tone everyone reserves for a lovers’ spat in front of company.

The kindest man started, seeming in no way perturbed: "I was just--"'

“Shh!” Crowley hissed. Then he turned back to her and started gesturing with his hands, as if to corral her into her office. “Come on. Let’s go. Let’s go.”

“Okay,” she agreed. She had enough of her druthers back, by this point, to conclude that there must have been a better way for her to handle this. But, more than anything else, she was relieved to turn away from the kindest man she had ever laid eyes on, to escape him into the comforting privacy of her office.

Crowley paused for a moment before following her in. He turned back, once again, to the kindest man. He pointed a finger at him, wagged it. “Just… Be good,” he said.

The kindest man rolled his eyes, with a theatricality that did not match Crowley’s own but was in
the running. Then Crowley entered fully into her office, and she could close the door behind him. She hesitated there, by the door, while Crowley flopped down into his chair. She hesitated, to give herself a moment to appreciate the solidity of the door that separated her from those kind, piercing blue eyes.

“So, that’s Aziraphale,” she said, still by the door.

Crowley made dissatisfied noises.

“I…” She paused to collect her thoughts. This was not how this session was supposed to go. The session had not even begun yet, and already she had to correct course. She had to correct course and yet, at the same time, she would have been satisfied to call the whole session off, so she could focus all of her attention on developing a full systems analysis of the brief interaction she had witnessed between Crowley and his friend.

Aziraphale was, not at all, anything like what she had expected. He was, at first glance, precisely the opposite of what anyone should expect for Crowley’s life partner. And yet, at the same time, for reasons she couldn’t quite articulate, he made perfect sense. She anticipated, once she had all her wits about her again, she would conclude that there was no way Crowley’s most cherished companion could be anyone but that overdressed, expressive-faced, terrifyingly kind man in her waiting area.

“This wasn’t part of the ground rules,” she said. She pulled herself away from the door, now, and moved to sit into her own seat.

“He’s just insurance,” Crowley said. He was sitting, a bit hunched over, and he was rubbing one hand with the other. “In case anything goes wrong.”

“Tell me about that,” she said.

“It’s been a very long time since I’ve done anything like this. He has a lot more experience with this sort of thing.”

“He’s more comfortable with honesty than you are,” she attempted. She could see the nerves coursing through Crowley’s whole system. She adopted a calm and collected attitude, to compensate.

“Something like that.” He let out a deep breath, clearly attempting to calm himself down. It pleased her to see him do that. It meant he had developed enough insight into himself that he could use calming techniques when he needed them.

“So,” she said, and she let that word hang between them for a moment, before continuing. “Today’s a big day, isn’t it?”

He frowned.

“How are you feeling about this?”

“I called and canceled at least ten times.”

“You did?” Now she frowned, confused, and she couldn’t help but glance over to the phone sitting on her desk. “I didn’t get any voicemails…”

“Yeah, uh…” He looked over to her phone, as well, then turned back to her. He looked sheepish. “I changed my mind.”
“You’re feeling conflicted.”

That must not have been correct interpretation, because he gave no indication of agreement. He looked at her, the way he did when he wanted her to know she had his attention, despite his sunglasses. He set his face into a serious expression. “You can still back out.”

She just smiled, as a response.

“I mean it,” he said.

“I know,” she said, her tone both compassionate and affectionate. She spoke with that tone, because it was earnestly how she felt. “You are very thoughtful.”

There were other ways she could have expressed this point. She could have said, you are really a very kind person. Or she could have said, I am touched by how much you care. Or she could have said, it’s very nice of you to be so concerned about me. Under other circumstances, she would have chosen one of those options, to challenge him, to force him to confront certain aspects of his personality he preferred to ignore. But not today. Today, if they moved forward with what they had planned, there would not be time for that.

“Please keep in mind,” she continued. “This is your space. You don’t have to worry about me. I’ll take care of myself. This is your space to--”

He scoffed loudly to cut her off. He shook his head. “Don’t martyr yourself, Aubrey Thyme. I’ve never liked martyrs, they’re boring and moody. I can tell you, you’re not cut out for it. And you’re not going to be a martyr, if I can manage it.” Something like worry crossed his face, and then he hid it. He took off his sunglasses, so he could look her in the eyes. “Tell me if you want to back out.”

“Ready when you are,” she said, determined and plain.

“Okay,” he said. He nodded. He smiled at her. The naked intimacy of that smile took her by surprise. Almost as soon as he had given that smile to her, however, it collapsed back into something far more cautious. “Remember the ground rules. Run, if you have to. If you want. Don’t think if you should or not, just do it. I’ll stay here, until you come back. And…” He couldn’t hide without his sunglasses on: she could see the fear of an abandoned child in his eyes, as he said this final bit. “The moment you ask me to leave, I will. I promised.”

“Right,” she said. She nodded. She lessened her smile into an expression that matched the gravity he was putting into this. She did not share that same sense of gravity, but she could acknowledge and respect it, all the same. “I remember the ground rules.”

He took in a breath, as if he were about to say something more, but then he didn’t. He nodded once more, a finality. He put his sunglasses back on, which made sense to her.

She expected him to look away, off to the side. She expected him to move away, as well, so that he could feel more safely hidden, to compensate for the exposure he would suffer by revealing whatever it was he meant to tell her, today. She expected him to open his mouth, and then hesitate, and then speak. But he didn’t. Instead, he leaned even more forward in his seat, towards her. His jaw set, shut tight, as if he were concentrating. He raised one hand up, up so that it was even with her line of sight, and then he hesitated, as if preparing for something.

He snapped his fingers, and she didn’t have time to wonder why.

***
“Holy shit, holy fuck, fuck fuck fuck, Christ on a stick, god damned holy mother of God, holy shit, holy shit, holy fuck--”

“You probably should stop with the casual blasphemy,” he said. He winced.

There was a piece of Aubrey Thyme’s brain that was able to interpret what he had said. She knew this, because she was aware that she had understood it. Or, at least, there was a different piece of her brain that felt confident she had understood it, although there was yet another piece that suggested she shouldn’t trust that previous piece’s judgment at the moment. There was also an additional piece of her brain that was able to see Crowley and recognize him. He was standing across the room from her, arms crossed in front of himself. She knew this, or she accepted it at least, because she was aware of some bit of her brain having the thought: *He looks worried.*

Generally speaking, cursing is associated with casual interactions and a lack of professionalism. Studies have shown that clients have less trust in a therapist who uses curse words during a session, regardless the client’s own propensity to curse. Therefore, it is recommended that a therapist avoid cursing as a general rule. This is not to say, however, that there are not exceptions. When a client, himself, uses a particular crass term, it can be valuable to use it in return. This can increase the strength of the therapeutic alliance, and it can help the client feel as though he is understood. There are also instances where the properly-applied curse word can be merited by the shocking effect it can have on the client. *That’s bullshit*, said when one usually does not say ‘bullshit,’ can mean something far more significant than *That’s bull-hockey* or *That’s not true* or *That’s a load of crap.* So, when it comes to the question of whether a professional therapist, like Aubrey Thyme, should make use of foul language while working with a client, the answer is the same as it is for so many aspects of successful therapeutic work: it depends. It depends on the circumstances, it depends on the specific client’s current needs, and it depends on what is authentic and comfortable for the therapist, herself. Thus, as a professional therapist, Aubrey Thyme only ever sparingly used curse words while in session with a client, and, when she did, she made sure she had good therapeutic justification for it.

A part of Aubrey Thyme’s brain felt satisfied by its ability to spin through this full evaluation of the therapeutic inappropriateness of the words coming out of her mouth. This same part of her brain felt satisfied that she could recognize how concerned her client, Crowley, looked at the present moment. Aubrey Thyme, however, was not willing to give this part of her brain a lot of credit. She was, instead, more inclined to listen to the part of her brain that was growing increasingly concerned by the fact that, despite the work the other parts of her brain were doing, they seemed to have absolutely no noticeable effect on the signals the verbal and linguistic portions of her brain were sending to her speech apparatus.

“Holy fuck goddamn goddamn goddamn holy fuck holy fuck holy fuck holy fuck holy fuck holy fuck--”

“Angel!” Crowley yelled out, and Aubrey Thyme watched as he lunged for her door, swung it wide open, in a way that she never, ever did. “Get in here!”

She watched. She couldn’t help but watch. A piece of her brain expended a bit of effort and determined that she was, in fact, still oriented with regard to time, place, self, and situation. In other words, given the evidence currently available to this bit of her brain, she knew when and where she was, she knew who she was, and she understood her situation. A different bit of her brain offered the hesitant suggestion that, perhaps, she shouldn’t trust her own judgment on that matter at the moment.

“Holy fuck holy fuck holyfuckholyfuckholyfuckholyfuckholyfuck--”
That kind man was in her office, now. He was here. Heler office, standing in her space, although she hadn’t invited him in. She hadn’t done that. He had no right to be here, because she was the one who got to decide who entered this space, her space, and who didn’t. He was looking at her, and he looked worried, and a bit of her brain tried to explain, *He is good and he is kind and he will save you*, but a different bit of her brain was yelling, *No no no no no no*. 

“What did you do?” Aziraphale said, sounding shocked, sounding exasperated, sounding dismayed.

“You know what I did!” Crowley hissed at him.

“You’re lucky she’s not speaking in tongues!” Aziraphale exclaimed.

“Really? Because I think tongues would be better than this,” Crowley kept hissing.

Aubrey Thyme recognized that the reason he had said this was because she was still talking. Or, at least, still making noise. She had almost tuned it out. Parts of her brain had tuned it out. Her mouth hurt a bit, and she felt out of breath, but she still had almost tuned it out.

“Holyfuckholyfuckholyfuckholyfuck--”

Aziraphale’s attention turned fully on her, and it made her want to burrow down into nothingness until she ceased to be. He was looking at her, not like he had earlier, but still not in a way that made her feel comfortable. He looked at her like he could see too well. He looked at her like he could see her insides, the parts she never wanted anyone to see. He looked like he would love and accept her, despite whatever he had found within her, but that was poor consolation.

“I can’t believe you!” Aziraphale still sounded exasperated. She watched as he threw his hands up, turned to give Crowley a look, and then turned back to her. “You gave her Divine Insight without performing a conversion?”

Aubrey Thyme did not know what this meant. She understood the individual words, or at least pieces of her did. She knew what divine meant, and a part of her brain now knew exactly what it meant. She also knew what insight meant, although that concept wasn’t very comforting at this precise moment. She also knew what conversion meant, but not a single part of her brain was willing to consider its relevance to her current situation.

“No conversion,” Crowley said, with the sort of insistance and obstinance she was so familiar with from him. *Good old Crowley*, some bit of her thought. “Do not convert her.”

“You’re asking for the impossible,” Aziraphale said. His eyes were still on her, but now they were on the top of her head, like there was some useful information he could gather by looking at the crown of her hair. He was standing over her, standing very close, and he was peering at her.

Crowley, she recognized, was hovering over one of Aziraphale’s shoulders. He, too, was peering down at her. He did things with his hands, things that made part of her brain think, *He is agitated*, and a different part of her brain think, *What that gesture means is, just do it anyway*. A third part of her brain thought, *Just do what anyway?

“Do not convert her,” Crowley said, again, like it was the final word. He liked to give himself the final word in a conversation, a piece of her brain reminded some other pieces of her.

She heard Aziraphale sigh out. She watched him glare at Crowley. And then she was distracted by several different pieces of her brain, all at once, becoming aware of how wet her cheeks were.
You’re crying, a part of her thought.

Never allow yourself to cry more than the client himself cries, a different part of her thought.

This isn’t good, both of those parts thought, in agreement.

By the time she was aware of Aziraphale again, he was crouched down in front of her. He was crouched down, so that he was eye level with her. He was looking her in the eyes again.

He smiled at her.

Part of her saw that smile and broke open completely, thoroughly, unrelentingly. That part of her wanted to let herself fall forward into his arms, to fall into him, to let him completely enwrap her, to let him make her whole, because he could, he could, he was someone who could love her in every way she had never earned. A different part of her, or perhaps the same part of her, saw that smile, that open and beautiful smile, and it made her want to flay herself alive, gouge out her eyes, burn herself up to a crisp for him, because it was no less than what she deserved.

“Aubrey?” He said. His voice was quiet and calm, like a lake, a serene lake, a lake you could throw a pebble into on a beautiful day, a lake that could swallow you up and then you would sink deep down into it forever. “That’s your name, isn’t it?”

She nodded. She thought she nodded. Several parts of her, at least, were fairly certain that she nodded. Her mouth was still doing things, she was fairly sure.

“You’re alright, child,” he said, and of course he called her child, because she could be his child, he could protect her and make her whole, how dare he. He reached out and took hold of one of her hands. That’s when several pieces of her realized that the fingernails on that hand had been gouging bloody lines into the skin of her cheek. Then he reached out and took hold of her other hand, and those same pieces of her realized that that hand had been scratching wounds into her other cheek, as well. He held both of her hands, and some piece of her wondered how those smooth, soft, perfect and powerful hands did not burn like flame.

She did not like being touched in her office. She did not use physical touch, not in her therapeutic work. She did not touch her clients, and she did not let them touch her. All of her, all of her, felt this. He was glorious and beautiful and she loved him and she never wanted him to let go of her hands, but she also hated it, couldn’t stand it, wanted to wrench free from him.

“Shh,” he said. “It’s alright. You’re going to be alright.” Now holding both of her hands still with just one of his, he reached out and smoothed some hair out of her face. She wanted to hiss. Maybe she did. He moved his hand down to one cheek, and she became aware of how much pain she had felt from her scratches because suddenly it was gone. He moved his hand to her other cheek, and then she wasn’t in any pain at all, not any more.

“You are alright,” he said. But it wasn’t like he said it, it was more like he did it. His eyes were commanding her, and she felt the pieces of her brain obey. She felt herself breathing in and out, deep and loud, because she could breathe again. She felt her mouth open and close, wordlessly, because she could control it again. She felt that she was being stitched together again.

“You see?” He said, and he smiled, he smiled. “Everything’s alright,” he said, but he said it while he was still looking at her. He was looking in her, and her brain was stitching itself back together, and it wasn’t the same as it had been before. It wasn’t the same as before, because she knew. She knew. She knew, and he was looking at her, he possessed her, he was good and kind--the kindest man she had ever laid eyes on--and he had both of her hands in one of his, and he was crouched
before her, in her office, in her space, and--

HE WAS LOOKING AT HER

--those eyes were too much, there was too much to them or maybe too many of them, and he saw her and she saw him, and it was too much, too much, too much. She couldn’t help it, she shook, she pulled her hands away from him. She couldn’t help it, she couldn’t.

He was too kind, too good, too sweet, TOO MUCH, and she couldn’t help it.

She screamed. She scrambled in her seat, out of it, pushing it backwards, tripping and falling to get away. She screamed, wresting her eyes away from his. She screamed, and she ran.

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She hid. There was a women’s bathroom down the hall from her office. She had run there to hide. She hid in one of the stalls, the stall door locked, her feet up on the toilet’s seat, so she could be as hidden as possible.

She had no watch. She could not know how long she stayed hidden there.

By the time she returned her feet to the ground, her legs were shaky. All of her was shaky. It was hard to walk. By the time she made it back to the waiting area outside her office, it was dark outside.

It was dark inside, too. The door to her office was open, but the lights were not on.

Crowley had said, he would stay. He had said, if she ran, he would stay until she returned. Now, she could understand why.

Her shaky legs took her to the open door. She stood in the door frame. She looked inside.

Crowley was sitting in his customary seat. He was splayed out, legs fully extended, like a child who had been sitting in one spot for far too long. The other chair, her chair, had been righted. Everything in the room looked normal. Even Crowley looked normal.

He turned his head towards her. She flipped the switch to turn on the lights. She saw how concerned he looked.

He was waiting for her to speak.

“Oh he still here?” she asked, and her voice was hoarse.

“No,” he said. He shook his head. He shifted into a slightly more upright posture. “We thought it would be best if he left. He sends his apologies.”

She thought about that.

“He left you a note.” Crowley pointed now, over to her desk. She could see, indeed, a small, crisply folded little note. She would look at it later. Maybe. “He just goes overboard, sometimes. He didn’t mean to scare you.”

She thought about that, too.

“I fucked up,” he said.
She had a lot to think about.

“You ask, and I’m gone,” he said, and he meant it. But she could hear that it hurt.

“What’s a conversion?” she asked.

“Exactly what you’d think.” He shrugged. At some point, while she was gone, he apparently had stolen a pen from her desk. He was toying with it. He was close to getting its clip broken off. “You take a human who’s complicated and clever and has all sorts of interesting beliefs and feelings, and you smooth it all out. You whisk up their brains until they’ll stand in line like they’re supposed to, and do and think every single little thing that they’re supposed to. They end up devout and obedient, and happy about it, even.”

She could hear the edge in his voice, when he said words like devout and obedient. She understood it.

“Did he do that to me?”

He peered at her. “You tell me,” he said. “You feeling particularly devout and obedient and happy right about now?”

“No.”

“Any sudden desire to go join a nunnery?”

She frowned, thought about that. “Should I become Catholic?”

He couldn’t help but chuckle a little. She realized, he was starting to hope she wasn’t going to kick him out.

“No.”

“Then don’t.”

“Am I damned?” She could recognize that she should be more terrified to ask this question. She considered this as evidence that she was in shock. That made sense.

“Do you really want to know?”

“No.”

He watched her for a moment, and she could tell he was deciding whether to believe her. “I can’t tell you whether you would have been or not, had you never run into me. You’re still pretty young, plenty of time for you to move more to one side or the other. But I can tell you, your status is different now.”

She tried to parse that. She failed. “That sounds bad.”

He took in a deep breath, and he looked like he was about to give her bad news. It made her feel just a little nervous, and she thought, again, that her affect was disturbingly flat. “I told you, Aziraphale goes overboard sometimes. Now, a while ago, I gave you a blessing. You didn’t notice, but I did. Just felt like it. Anyway. Then, today. Well.” He made an expression, like oops.
“Aziraphale felt really bad. I don’t think there’s been a human as blessed as you for a fair number of centuries.”

“I’m blessed?”

“Yeah.” He winced a little. “I think he may have also accidentally blessed your tree. Sorry.”

She looked over to the little tree she kept in the corner of her office, by her desk. “It’s fake,” she said.

“Not any more.” He winced a bit more deeply.

“I’m not going to remember to water it.” That probably wasn’t what should be worrying her, right now, she thought. She was still standing in the doorway to her office, and she decided she had had enough of that. She moved to her chair, the one across from Crowley, and she sat down. She slumped.

“You should know,” he said, sounding cautious. “You might start seeing things you wouldn’t have, not before. Other… beings, like me and Aziraphale. They might be disturbing.”

“Am I in danger?”

“No.” He smiled. “You’ve been blessed, which means that side will leave you completely alone.”

“That side?”

“You know.” He did something very expressive with his eyebrows. He motioned, upwards.

She thought about that for a moment. “What about, you know, your side?”

Someone who was not in shock would have felt very strange about saying that.

“Ah, well.” He repositioned himself in his seat again, sitting up straighter. He reached into his the pocket in his jacket lining, and he pulled out a piece of paper. It was a pristine, folded piece of paper. She recognized it, she recognized it immediately, and she was amazed at how pristine it still was. “You recognize this?” he asked.

“Uh-huh.” She did. She knew that sheet of paper, that document, on sight, even when it was folded. It was the paperwork she gave to every client, the first day they came to her. It was her informed consent agreement.

“This is a contract,” he said. He unfolded it, looked it over. “You signed it. It’s a contract you entered into. With me.”

“Oh fuck.”

That got his attention, and she saw him tense. She figured he was waiting to see if she was back to unstoppable cursing. When he was assured that she wasn’t, he shook his head. “Don’t worry. It’s completely innocuous. I made sure of that before I let you sign it. But all the same…” He made a movement with his head. “A contract with someone like me is something that others pay attention to. It lets them know that you’re not someone to mess with, unless they want to make me angry. And they don’t want to make me angry. Not right now, at any rate.”

The not right now part made his speech less reassuring than perhaps he intended. She frowned at him, as he folded the informed consent agreement back up and put it away.
“Really, it’s no problem,” he said, trying again. “The chances of that changing within your lifetime are really low.”

He really wasn’t good at being reassuring.

Aubrey Thyme felt like her mind was starting to warm up again. It seemed to her that she was still likely in shock, and she supposed she would be for a while still. But it was becoming easier for her to think, to reason, to formulate thoughts and hypotheses and concerns.

“Why aren’t I scared of you?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said, and he really seemed like he didn’t. “Not really good for my reputation, that.”

She thought about that. She felt overwhelmed by how much there was for her to think about.

“I’m glad you’re not,” he said.

The way he said that reminded her of the image she often got, when working with Crowley, of the scared and abandoned child, the child who was punished for asking for the bare minimum he needed to live, the child who had been neglected and left to beg. This image, somehow, still seemed fitting and accurate, to her, despite everything she now knew.

She smiled. She smiled at him. At the same time, however, her mind was still warming up. She found herself more capable of thought. She found herself better able to remember who she was, where she was, and what was happening. There was so much, now, that she understood, and so much else that she didn’t. She was, in many ways, adrift and confused. But, if there was one thing she knew, if there was one thing she could still grasp onto and cling to, hold tight to keep herself secure, it was this: she was a professional.

Aubrey Thyme was a professional mental health therapist. She had over ten years of experience working with trauma survivors. She took her professional responsibilities seriously, and she was duty-bound to abide by the requirements of her professional code of ethics.

Her professional code of ethics was not designed to cover circumstances of the sort she currently found herself in. But, still, it had been designed to be applicable even in unforeseeable circumstances, and she had been trained to use a decision procedure to apply its general rules to even the most unusual cases. That was what she had to do now.

She had an ethical duty to be a professional during her interactions with clients. She had failed at that: she may not have been able to control her behavior earlier, but her screaming curses were a far cry from the professionalism she was duty-bound to provide. She had a duty to maintain proper boundaries with her clients. The code of ethics may not have offered being physically and mentally healed by your client’s preternatural life partner as an example, but clearly that counted as a boundary violation. She had a duty to keep her interactions with her clients focused on their own therapeutic needs, and yet the entire conversation since she had returned to her office had been focused on her own needs, rather than his. She had a duty to practice only within her area of competence, and she most certainly was now very far from anything that left her feeling competent.

She thought through all of this, and she felt that there was only one conclusion she could draw.

“Crowley…” She hesitated. “I don’t think we can continue working together.”

“What?” That had surprised him. He hadn’t been expecting that. “Why?”
“I don’t know how to help you.”

“Sure you do,” he said, and he believed it. “Of course you do.”

She shook her head. “No, you see…” She shook her head some more. She tried to focus her thoughts. “This is… This is way beyond my experience. You get that, right? This is, definitely, something I’m not trained for.”

“You’re wrong,” he said, and she noticed a thickness to his voice. She would have put more thought into what that thickness meant, except her mind was feeling far too crowded.

“No, no. Don’t you see? You see--” She couldn’t remember what point she was trying to make. “You see, it’s that-- It’s just-- You see, you see--” She inhaled hard and deep. She felt her eyes going wide, her skin getting pinpricks. Her limbs started to hurt, because they were shaking. Oh shit, she thought, the shock’s wearing off.

“Aubrey, Aubrey.” Crowley was calling to her. He sat forward in his seat, but he stayed seated. He moved his head to try to capture her eyes, but she looked away. “Aubrey. You’re okay.” He kept trying to get her to look at him, but she was shaking her head, shaking it back and forth, she wouldn’t look at anything. “Stay with me, Aubrey. You’re here, right here, you’re nowhere else,” he said. His hands stretched out towards her, in a way that reminded her of how the other one had grasped hold of her hands. That caught her eyes. She stared at his hands, stared at them. They didn’t come close to her, just hovered in the air, in the space between them.

She felt her lungs start to hyperventilate. Her throat felt like it was clamping shut.

“Aubrey. Herb. Don’t do this.” His voice was quiet and insistent. He was trying to bring her back. He was still trying to catch her eyes, and he was failing. “Talk to me, Aubrey. Just talk. You can do that, right?”

She didn’t think she could.

“Come on. Just look at me, at least?” He must have gotten an idea then. He took off his sunglasses. He returned, again, to trying to capture her line of sight. “Just look at me. Stay calm. Stay calm. Look at me.”

He wasn’t commanding or ordering. He wasn’t begging. He was offering. And even while she was hyperventilating, even as she was shaking, she could accept that offer. She looked up at his eyes. She looked at his eyes, his expressive, naked, frightened eyes. They were eyes that could not hide the pain they held. They were the eyes of someone who was lonely and scared. They were eyes that, she knew, contained desperate needs, and they were needs that she knew how to fill.

They were the sort of eyes she could look into.

“That’s right, that’s it,” he said, nodding a little, keeping eye contact. “You’re okay, Herb. You’re okay. You here with me? Look at me. I’m here with you.”

She wasn’t hyperventilating anymore, but she had to concentrate to keep her breaths slow and deep. She was trying to get her limbs to relax. Even still, she had enough mental capacity to think his wording was strange. Here with me? Where else would she be? Why would he ask whether she was here?

Oh, she thought. Because she remembered. Because, she remembered, that was what she had said to him, the very first time they had met.
“Look around the room. Yeah?” He was nodding, reassuring, supporting. His eyes were still on her. “Find something. You find something, and you say out loud what it is.”

Oh, she thought. Again. Because she knew what he was doing.

She turned her head to the side, just a little. She found, with her eyes, a box of tissues. “A box of tissues,” she said.

“Yep, sure. Describe it.”

She smiled. She was calming down. She was returning to some sort of equilibrium. But that wasn’t why she smiled. “It’s a blue box, and there’s a white tissue sticking out of it,” she said.

“Uh-huh. Okay. One down, four more to go.”

She chuckled. She couldn’t help it. She was doing better. She was doing better, and Crowley, that angry, cantankerous, too-cool-for-school son of a bitch was trying to walk her through the grounding technique she had taught him during their very first meeting. 5-4-3-2-1: describe five things you see, four things you feel, three things you hear, two things you smell, and one thing you taste. He remembered it, and he was helping her use it.

“No, it’s okay. It’s fine,” she said. “I’m doing better.” She was. She was very tired, but she was calmer.

“Okay.” He nodded. He looked scared and little. She was surprised, how fragile he could be, given all that she now knew about him. “Okay,” he said again, and he sat back further in his seat.

“Thank you,” she said, and she meant it. She was doing well enough, now, to notice that he didn’t give any theatrical eye roll, or huff out, or otherwise express displeasure at her gratitude. He had simply taken it in.

Progress, she thought.

Aubrey Thyme thought that, and her thoughts turned again to her ethical duties as a professional therapist. She thought about the disruptions in boundaries they had experienced today. She thought about her lack of competency. But she thought, also, now, of the broken and fragile being sitting in front of her. The professional code of ethics she was duty-bound to follow did not simply provide rules for when and how to provide services to a client. It also spelled out a set of central values, values that are meant to guide upright action, even when complicated circumstances meant the more specific rules could not clearly be applied. These values included non-maleficence, or the value of doing no harm, and beneficence, the value of working to provide benefit.

Aubrey Thyme, as a professional therapist, was duty-bound to help those in need. She was duty-bound to do no harm.

If Aubrey Thyme terminated her therapeutic relationship with Crowley, she considered, he would have few options for further treatment. He could find another atheist, but then he would hit the same wall, once the work progressed to the point that he had to be truthful. He could find a practitioner who was religious, but she could only imagine how poorly that would go. Most likely, he would do neither. By this point in their relationship, Aubrey Thyme liked to believe she understood Crowley fairly well, even if she now understood how very much she didn’t understand about him. She believed she understood exactly what he would do, if she no longer would see him as a client: nothing. He would do nothing. He would be left out in the cold, alone, without succor. He would accept it as condemnation to continuing torment.
She would not do that. She would not reject Crowley. She knew—or, at least, she glimpsed at—precisely how much harm a rejection like that could do to him, given what she now knew.

“I wasn’t thinking clearly, a moment ago,” she said. She was comforted by how normal her tone of voice sounded in her ears. “I am sorry about that. We can keep working together.”

She saw him nod. It was a small, slow nod. It was the sort of nod that said: You came too close to hurting me just now. She understood that nod.

“We’re going to have to renegotiate our boundaries, though,” she said, trying to work through everything that would have to be done. There was so much, and she was too tired. “There’s going to be a lot for us to talk through. I’m going to have to put a lot of thought into this.”

The puzzle-solving part of her mind was starting to perk up. She now had a lot of puzzles to get around to solving.

“Think you’ll be ready by next week?” he asked.

“Well…” She wasn’t sure. “Let’s meet next week, no matter what. We’ll see where I’m at. We’ll take it from there.”

“Ohay,” he said. She could tell from the way he said it, along with the way he started shifting in his seat, that he was about to stand. He was getting ready to leave. This struck her: it didn’t feel right. Something was wrong about that.

“Hold up,” she said, holding up a hand to keep him still. He settled back down. He would wait for her, so she gave herself a moment to let her thoughts get themselves in order. She let that feeling of wrongness coalesce, until it made sense to her. Then she looked back up at him.

“You haven’t done it yet,” she said.

“What?”

“What you came here to do, today. You haven’t told me the truth.”

He gave her a look, the sort of look that said: Are you serious?

She was. “You haven’t said it. You haven’t told me. You said you wanted to do this right, but you haven’t yet. We won’t have time to process it tonight—I’m pretty sure we’re pretty far beyond the hour, at this point. But, you came here to tell me something today, and so I think you should do it.”

“Ohay,” he said. He thought, and then he looked like he understood.

“You comfortable with that?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Ohay.” She sat up straighter in her chair. She adopted a posture that was appropriate for a professional who was working with a client. She cracked her neck, and then she looked at him. She was ready.

He sat up straighter, too, and he looked her in the eye. “Aubrey Thyme,” he said, “I was created before the formation of the Earth. I was an angel. I fell from heaven, and I became a demon of Hell. I am the serpent of Eden. That’s what I am. It's what I always will be. I am a demon.”

She let the words hang in the air between them. She smiled.
“Yes,” she said. “Thank you. Thank you for sharing that with me. It means a lot to me, that you would be willing to tell me that.”

She said it, because it was true. She said it, with her voice full of empathy and compassion, because that was what she was trained to do, because that was what her client needed, because that was what the moment called for. She said it, because she was a professional psychotherapist, and this was her job.

“I’ll see you next week,” she said.
Cancellation Policy

Chapter Summary

Aubrey Thyme has other clients.

You have three new voice messages. First voice message.

“Hey, Aubrey. This is Sarah. Sarah Drivara? I know we’re scheduled to meet in just a few hours, but something’s come up. Don’t worry! Nothing bad. Actually--actually, really good! I hate to do this to you. I feel awful. Anyway, I will definitely be there next week. Okay, bye!”

Next voice message.

“Aubrey, this is Matt. I’m not going to be able to make it today. I understand your cancellation policy, so no worries there. Call me, if you need anything from me.”

Next voice message.

“Oh my God, you wouldn’t believe it. You really wouldn’t! Listen, it’s like a miracle, a literal miracle! I swear, when I tell you, you won’t believe it. But it means I just can’t be there today, just can’t make it. I have to cancel. See you next week! Oh, this is Maya.”

End of new messages.
Aubrey Thyme and Crowley meet for the first time, after everything changed.

Those who work in helping professions, like therapists, understand the risks. They are subject to burn out. They are subject to compassion fatigue, to vicarious trauma, to finding themselves falling apart at the seams as a result of the constant inundation of other people’s needs. It is a risk, a constant risk, that the helper is trained to keep eternally in the back of her mind: how far can I go, before I hurt myself?

Therapists earn their bread and butter by convincing the broken and disheartened to engage in self-care. Many of them recognize the irony of it.

Psychotherapists who specialize in trauma are at special risk. They earn their bread and butter by helping those who have undergone inexpressible horrors try to express them. They smile, they breathe in deeply, they tear up, they encourage patience and resilience and self-compassion, and they do this all while confronting unimaginable stories of cruelty and abuse, the worst that humans can do to one another, the worst that can be done at all. Their job is to look head on at evil, to acknowledge it, and to find a way to work with it.

Aubrey Thyme had always had a knack for that.

She was a professional, and she had over ten years of experience working with cases of severe trauma. Ten years, she knew, was a long tenure for specializing in trauma. She had watched, over those ten years, as peers dropped away, dropped out, burnt out and shriveled up. She would run into them at conferences, and she would see how they laughed softly, without the smile reaching their eyes, and mumble about how they had moved on. She would nod and soothe. She would say she understood. But she did not actually understand, not really.

Aubrey Thyme had always known she was good at her job.

There are tricks and skills that trauma specialists can use, to help them avoid or at least stave off vicarious trauma for as long as possible. It is a matter of simple compartmentalization. The trauma specialist trains her mind to separate itself into multiple compartments, to keep them apart, to access particularly challenging compartments only when it was professionally, or personally, appropriate. Keep them hidden, keep them secure, keep all the pain and horror and bile under lock and key, until it was safe and appropriate to release it.

It was an act of imagination.

Aubrey Thyme had trained herself to compartmentalize by imagining a library’s card catalog storage box. She would close her eyes, between sessions, and visualize it. It had 26 cabinets, each corresponding to a different letter of the alphabet. She kept its contents alphabetized. She would imagine running her fingers over the cold metal pull-tabs which opened the drawers. Unlike a regular card catalog, this one had a lock on each drawer. She would imagine the sound the keys would make, turning in the lock. She would imagine the hook on a wall, where she visualized keeping a ring with 26 distinct keys, one for each of the catalog’s cabinets.
It worked for her.

When she felt the need to, she would close her eyes and imagine an empty piece of card paper. She would pick up an imagined pencil, and then she would write whatever she needed to compartmentalize away, on that imagined card. She would take the imagined ring of keys off the hook, moving to the appropriate drawer, unlocking it, and filing the card away. She would feel the dusty coolness of all the collected cards, stacked in such pleasing order. And then she would close the drawer back up, lock it back up, put the keys back where they belonged. And then she would move on.

She kept all of the vile horrors she had heard locked up tight, accessible only when she needed them. She could access them when she needed them, and she could ignore them when she needed to. She could keep them cut off, stifled, unobtrusive. Aubrey Thyme could control them.

Her card catalog system had grown more sophisticated and imaginatively solid over time, although it had undergone no major revisions for at least five years. Now, however, it did. She put in a new drawer, a 27th one. The new drawer squeezed itself in between ‘C’ and ‘D’. It was the only drawer that had more than a letter on its front. What it said was ‘Crowley.’

That’s where she would keep it all. All of it. Everything she knew, everything she felt, all her memories of the deep blue eyes that had felt like burning and drowning, all the shaking and confusion that came from what she could not find within herself to doubt, all the questions that ached, viscera. She stored it all away. She locked it all up. She kept it there, locked up, hidden and safe, and thus out of the way. Aubrey Thyme was a professional, after all, and it was her duty to ensure she could perform her job for her clients without the uncomfortable intrusion of her own personal problems. So she locked them up, and she hid them, and she did her job.

She would let them out, when it was safe for her to do so. At night, after she had finished her work for the day. On the weekends. During her personal time she would let that drawer open, and she would let herself feel any number of things, and think any number of things, and respond in any number of ways. She would cope with it all, or at least try to cope with it, or use all the coping techniques she had at her disposal to find a way to live with it.

Some of her coping techniques, she knew, were less adaptive than others. She understood this. She accepted this. She was satisfied with this, so long as the results were what she wanted. Aubrey Thyme could do whatever was necessary, personally, to ensure that she could be who she needed to be, professionally.

Aubrey Thyme was a survivor. She was a survivor, and so she would do what she had to in order to survive. She was a professional, and she liked being a professional, and that was why she had always survived.

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It was twenty-five minutes before her next session with Crowley was scheduled to start. She decided to leave her office. Her plan was to go outside, go stand in the sun, close her eyes, and visualize the locks and keys on her card catalog. Her plan had been to let the fresh air soothe the headache she hadn’t been able to shake all day. That was her plan, twenty-five minutes before her session with Crowley was scheduled to start, and that was why she had opened the door to her waiting area.

She opened the door to her waiting area, twenty-five minutes beforehand, and she saw that he was already there.
“You’re early,” she said, standing in her doorway, feeling at sea.

“No,” he said, cool and collected, not shifting one bit in response to her presence. “I’m just not late.”

He had never been early before. Not that she knew, at least.

She saw him. She saw that he was sitting. He was not sprawling, not slouching, not reclining, but sitting, like any normal human would. He was holding, in his lap, a copy of *Better Homes and Gardens* that had occupied her waiting area’s coffee table for at least three years. His head was angled down, as one would expect from someone reading a magazine. She couldn’t find within herself the ability to believe he was actually reading it.

Usually, when he wore his sunglasses, he used his brow and head angle to compensate, to let her know where he was looking. He did that, at least, when he wanted her to know. Apparently, right now, he didn’t. It was possible that he had shifted his eyes to watch her, but he gave no indication that he had done so. He looked like a human reading a magazine.

“Well,” she said, because she could think of nothing else to say. “I’ll see you in twenty-five minutes.”

He gave no reply. There was nothing else to do about it. She stepped back into her office, and she shut the door again.

Twenty-five minutes she had to spend, waiting. She took several deep breaths. She dry swallowed two aspirin. She rubbed at her temples. She was not prepared, and she would not be prepared, and he was already there, in her waiting area, conspicuously just-not-late.

On her desk, she had a pad of sticky-notes. She sat down and collected it. She also collected a pen, and then she sat, for several long minutes, looking at the empty yellow note. She would write herself a reminder. Not the kind of reminder that was alphabetized away, hidden away, so it could do no harm. Instead, it would be the kind of reminder that she needed to keep real and tangible.

She wrote: *He’s a person.*

Afterwards, she adhered the sticky-note to the inside wall of her desk drawer. She would keep it there, safe and secure. It would be accessible there whenever she found herself in need of it. When she sat in her chair, during a session, she would be able to glance over to it, to remind herself it was there.

After twenty-five minutes had passed, she stood, opened her door, and invited him in.

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“Ground rules,” she said, once he was seated.

“For what?” he asked. He was, again, sitting, and it was unsettling. He looked uncomfortable.

“For everything,” she said, making a broad gesture to the room. “All of this.”

“Ah ha,” he said, and he nodded. He understood. She thought she saw him start to lean back, to get into his comfortable sprawl, but then he stopped himself. “What do you have in mind?”

“Actually, let’s start with you,” she said, because she had anticipated that response. Beyond that, though, she was not sure. She was not sure what he would say, what ground rules he would need or
find acceptable, how the dynamic between them would be different or the same. She felt unprepared, and she hated feeling unprepared, and she was working to keep it hidden.

“Now that I know what I know--” She faltered, lost her pace. She was annoyed at herself for falling into euphemism, and she was annoyed, equally, that she couldn’t quite bring herself to rephrase it. “Is there anything you think you need from me?”

“Well,” he said, too quickly for him to have actually taken her question seriously. “Exorcisms are right out.”

She put on a grim look.

“They don’t even work on this body, but they’re really annoying.”

“You’re making a joke out of this,” she said.

“No, I’m not,” he said, in a sighed-out kind of way, the kind of way that meant, *I was, but I’ll stop now.* Again, she saw him twitch a little, as if he wanted to sprawl out but stopped himself from doing so. “No holy water. Don’t bring any holy water in here.”

He wasn’t joking anymore, but the words made her feel like laughing. Aubrey Thyme was not someone who had ever interacted, either professionally or personally, with holy water. “I think I can manage that.”

“I’m serious,” he said, and he sounded like it.

“Right. Okay.” So that was another thing to file away: holy water was real, and it was serious. “What else?”

He tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair. He made a collection of *I’m thinking* faces. “Oh--Don’t use his name.”

“He… He has a name?”

“Huh?”

“I didn’t know He even had a name.”

“Of course he has a name! Who doesn’t have a name?”

“I thought--He didn’t.” She was confused. He looked annoyed. “So, what should I call Him?”

“It doesn’t matter, so long as it’s not his name. The Evil One, Prince of Darkness, The Massive Prick, whatever.”

“Wait.”

“What?”

“You’re talking about…’” She pointed downwards. “*Him*?”

Now he looked confused. “Who did you…?”

She pointed upwards. Crowley followed the line made by her finger, and then he hissed out, “Oh, for Earth’s sake.” He lifted his glasses enough to rub at his eyes, and he shook his head. “No, Herb. No. *She* has a name, too, but I don’t think you know it.”
“She?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Really. She?”

“Yup.”

“Huh.” Aubrey Thyme thought about that. And then she thought about it some more. She found she had a lot to think, about that, especially within her professional capacities. “You really did work with Freud, didn’t you?”

“Don’t you dare,” he warned, now scowling at her. But it was a friendly scowl. “Ground rules.”

“Right.” She accepted that. She got it. She shouldn’t have let that question out at all, she recognized. “Okay. Let’s get back on track. Anything else?”

He shrugged. He looked off to the side, and then he turned back to look at her. He made it very clear that he was looking at her.

“You doing alright?” he asked. He asked it like a concerned friend, but he was not her concerned friend. He was her client. He asked it like she might not be alright, like she would tell him if she wasn’t. But she wouldn’t.

“Thank you for your concern,” she said, and she smiled. She said it like a professional and she smiled like a professional, because that was what she was. “Any other ground rules you need?”

“Hm,” he said, sounding thoughtful, sounding unsatisfied. He was still looking at her. He looked, not like he was judging her, but like he was making judgments about her. She didn’t like that.

“How’s the tree?”

Of course he would ask about the tree. Of course he would. The tree was a goddamned annoyance. Aubrey Thyme did not care about the tree. She did not care about plants, either professionally or personally, and she had no interest in trying to keep things like trees and flowers and vines alive. This tree, in particular, was both a professional and personal nuisance. It was, in her mind, Aziraphale’s tree, not hers. If Crowley thought of it the same way, there’d be hell to pay when she inevitably killed it, and it would take hard work to make that into a therapeutically valuable experience for him.

“Looks like it’s doing fine,” she said, simply.

“It would do better if you moved it over by the window,” he said, and he even gestured towards the window, as if she needed a reminder about where it was located. “Not enough sunlight where it is now.”

This reminded her that he was a gardener, that he liked plants. She knew he kept a garden, and she knew that he was deeply proud of it. She knew how proud of it he was, because he never mentioned it without insulting it.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she said, stifling her desire to chuck the damned tree out the window. “Back to our ground rules--”

“It’s just, you know, I feel responsible for it,” he said.

She wanted him to shut up about the damned tree. She wanted him to move off the subject. She
also wanted to get back to ground rules, because she had some very important points to raise. But, even more, she wanted to understand why he had just cut her off to say this, of all things. Crowley, she well knew by this point, almost never accepted responsibility for anything.

“It’s the way it is because of me, isn’t it?” he went on. He tilted his head to the side, and he was still looking at her, and she was growing so annoyed at him because he was still sitting and not sprawling. “I did that to it. My responsibility. I take responsibility for it.”

Aubrey Thyme knew her job. She knew exactly how she should respond to what he was saying. She knew the precise therapeutic move to make, given what he had just said, given the way he had emphasized the words my and take. She knew what she should say was: This isn’t about the tree, Crowley, is it? She should put him on the spot. She should make him acknowledge that he was talking in code. But she wouldn’t do it. She wouldn’t ask that question. Because then, she suspected, he would put her on the spot, and she couldn’t have that.

“My tree,” she said. “My responsibility.”

He didn’t respond, beyond a clack noise he made with his tongue. At least he finally scooted down a little in the seat, into a half-sprawl. “Tell me your ground rules, Aubrey Thyme.”

She paused to take a deep breath. She closed her eyes, just momentarily, so she could take the card on which she had The Damned Tree written down and put it back where it belonged, in her card catalog, and lock it up, nice and tight, where it would be safely out of her attention until she had the time and energy to deal with it. After ten years of experience, she was good at doing this. She could do it quickly, looking barely like she had done more than taken a long blink, and her client would not even know. Aubrey Thyme was a professional.

“Okay, Crowley,” she said, mostly to buy herself time. “Look. Let’s start with this…” She was uncertain. This felt like dangerous ground. “What did you do to my other clients?”

He raised an eyebrow. He opened his mouth to speak. She couldn’t remember if his teeth had always looked that sharp.

“Nothing bad,” he said.

“Crowley.” Maybe she felt sick. She was a professional.

“Nothing bad!” he repeated, more emphatically. “Look, you were in no shape to see other clients last week. Would you have preferred they all just showed up? I took care of things.”

“That was a violation of federal law,” she said, with significance, with feeling. She felt her nostrils flare. She felt her lips twitch.

“Is that what you care about?” He sounded surprised, unimpressed. “I also didn’t drop by customs when I popped over here today, you worried about that too?”

She wasn’t gritting her teeth. They weren’t clattering. She was a professional, and this mattered. “You leave my other clients alone.”

Something flicked across his face, a quick expression, something that looked like rage. But then it was gone, and his face was still.

“I did not hurt them, Aubrey. I wouldn’t do that.”

There were a number of different potential responses available to her. None of them, however,
would have been professional. None of them had therapeutic merit.

“Ground rules,” she said. “Leave my other clients alone.”

He looked like he, too, had a number of different responses available to him. “Fine,” he said. “Not a problem. Don’t worry about it.”

Three times, she noticed. He agreed to it three times.

“Thank you,” she said. She nodded at him. She felt too tired to smile. Her headache hadn’t gone away.

She watched as he bit at the side of his cheek, giving no response. She acknowledged to herself that she should check in with him, ask about how he was feeling. She should ask about that expression she had seen on his face. She should admit that she felt uncertain and even a little scared. She should be willing to say the word *demon*. Aubrey Thyme was very capable of recognizing the many things she should be doing.

“Okay,” she said. “One more thing. You up for one more thing?”

“Fine,” he said, although he didn’t mean it.

“Three sessions ago,” she said, to start. She wasn’t comfortable. She felt her lip twitch again. “You did something to my clock, didn’t you?”

Aubrey Thyme knew her client, Crowley, fairly well at this point. She knew how to observe him. She knew that he thought best when he could move, the physical activity freeing up his mind. She knew that their therapeutic alliance was strongest, when he was willing to throw petty insults at her. And she knew it was at its most frayed when he grew slow, when he stilled, when he sat silently tense.

Over the past week, Aubrey Thyme had found herself reading up on herpetology. She hadn’t felt that any of it was useful, at the time. But now, as she watched her client, Crowley, she could not help but compare the intensity of his motionless posture to the images and videos she had seen.

“What if I had?” he said, finally.

“That’s unacceptable,” she said.

“Unacceptable?” he repeated, and there was an edge to it, an edge that felt dangerous. It was an edge she had heard in his voice before, and it was something she normally would have paid very close attention to. Normally, she would have done something about it, made sure he was aware of it, helped him through it. But not now, not about this.

“Unacceptable,” she said, again, like a foot coming down.

“I didn’t do anything to your clock,” he said. He was angry. She could see that he was angry. She had a headache, and she was tired, and she wanted to get home so she could *cope*, but she could see how angry she had made him. And she could also hear him, the way he sounded as he was angry, the way he sounded out the words, *to your clock*, and it made her remember that Crowley was a liar.

“Let me rephrase that,” she said, squinting shut her eyes, letting herself think. “Did you do anything to me, or to this room, or… to anything, that led to us spending less than a total of fifty minutes working together, three sessions ago?”
“It doesn’t matter,” he said.

“It does,” she said.

“It doesn’t matter,” he repeated, like saying it could make it true. It couldn’t.

“You interfered with our work.”

“No, I didn’t.” He was a liar.

Aubrey Thyme was angry. She could acknowledge, to herself, that she was angry. She was angry, in the middle of a session, with a client who was also angry. She was viciously angry. She was spitting angry, biting angry, raging angry. She felt like kicking in his too-sharp teeth.

“We work in fifty minute increments, Crowley,” she said. “That’s what we agreed to, when you first came here. And you interfered with that.”

She had a headache, and she was tired, and she needed a chance just to cope, but even a therapist who is tired and aching is able to understand anger. Aubrey Thyme had always understood anger. Anger was, after all, what so many trauma survivors thrive in and through. She understood that anger works as a mask for other emotions, deeper and more vital emotions. Anger masks shame. It masks fear. It masks sorrow. Aubrey Thyme may not have felt well, but she understood that she was angry, and she understood that anger functions as a mask for shame, and fear, and sorrow.

She refused to interrogate which of those three options her current anger was masking.

“Fine,” he said, or rather he spat. He sneered at her, and it wasn’t a friendly sneer. It was an angry sneer, because he was just as angry as she was. No, she reconsidered: he was angrier than she was. He was angry because anger masks shame, and fear, and sorrow. He was angrier than she was, because in this instant he had far more to lose than she did.

“I get it,” he spat out again, and he pushed himself out of his seat, and he sneered again, and then he was stomping, and he was storming his way out the door. He was gone. He had stormed out, he had left in the middle of their session, and her office was empty.

One second.

She sat, across from the empty seat, her whole body thrumming.

Two seconds.

She breathed in.

Three seconds.

She decided, if he weren’t back in fifteen minutes, she would call him.

Four seconds, and he was back.

He stormed back into the room with the same amount of explosive energy as he had left with. He pushed himself back into his seat. He sat, hunched over, hands clutching each other between his knees. He didn’t look at her. He was looking, instead, at the floor between them.

She estimated. Four seconds seemed like enough time for him to storm his way to the edge of her waiting area and then storm back. It did not, however, seem like enough time for him to storm out, pause to reconsider, and then storm back. He hadn’t had to think about it. He had never planned on
going farther than he needed to prove his point. It had simply been a test, a trial run. It wasn’t a test of leaving--she was certain he needed no practice to do that. He had left, and then he had turned, and he had tested whether he could come back.

He had been angry. She had been angry. She had called his behavior unacceptable. And, still, he had been able to come back.

By this point in their relationship, they were very good at sitting in silence with one another. It had lost its awkwardness long ago. They both had substantial experience, sitting with each others’ breaths. They could sit with one another, in silence, as they calmed.

“I’m glad you came back,” she said. She meant it.

He didn’t respond. He kept looking at the floor between them. He was still, but not like before. The taut anxiety was gone. There was a quietude to his stillness. He sucked on his teeth, like he was thinking.

“I probably wasn’t ready for this yet,” she said. She considered tacking on, I’m sorry, but she decided against it. Now was not a time to push him. She already had, and she hadn’t been very conscientious about it. It wasn’t what either of them needed, not right now. What they both needed, right now, was something else entirely.

“Have I ever told you,” he asked, sounding cautious, "how Aziraphale and I met?"

She smiled. She couldn’t help it: his wording was charming. He had not said, Let me tell you… He had not said, You really should know… He had not said, I really want to say this… He had, instead, used such a casual wording, the sort of wording that works for an anecdote between friends, like a story told and re-told a hundred times at one’s favorite bar. He chose this wording, even though there was absolutely no way either of them could think he ever had told her, before, about how he and Aziraphale had met. He chose this wording, because he understood it was what both of them needed.

“No,” she said, still offering her smile. “I don’t think you have. I’d love to hear it.”

“Okay,” he said. He looked up at her, and he smiled back. He leaned back, for the first time that day, and she watched him sprawl out in his chair as if he had never learned what it meant to sit. “This was right after the apple,” he said, as a start, and then he kept going.

It was a good story, a sweet one, the way he told it, although it was not artfully told. Aubrey Thyme realized that this could, quite possibly, be the first time he had ever told it to anyone. She wondered about that, about what to make of it, about what six thousand years of holding in all of one’s stories would feel like. She wondered what Aziraphale’s version of the story would be like. She wondered all of this, but she also listened. She gave him her attention. Her head hurt, and she was tired, and she desperately needed to cope, but she could give him her attention. This was a story that mattered to him, and it was something she could cherish, for his sake.

He told stories for the rest of the session. They were true stories, stories about him, about Aziraphale. They were, all of them, easy stories. There was no pain--or, if there was, he skipped over it. There were hard stories he would have to tell, in the future. There were stories he would have to tell filled with pain and cruelty, and there would be therapeutic work for them to do with those stories. But these stories were different. These were not stories for them to do therapeutic work with, but instead through.

Crowley told her stories, and that was how they learned how to inhabit their new normal.
Dual Relationships

Chapter Summary

Aubrey Thyme needs to face her personal demons.

“Alright. Okay.” She looked down at the pad of paper that she held in her lap. She had a pen in one hand, so she could write notes. “Bear with me. I’m trying to make sense of all this.”

“Take your time,” he said, lazy and a little bored. He was leaning back in his chair, looking up at the ceiling. His posture would have satisfied Freud.

“You lost the Antichrist.”

“The nuns lost the Antichrist, best as I can figure.”

“How do you lose an Antichrist?”

“Hm, you’d have to ask the nuns.”

“You had the Antichrist.”

“In a basket. Backseat of my car.”

“You delivered the Antichrist.”

“Put him in the nun’s hands, myself.”

“And then you lost him.”

“The nuns lost him.”

“So how did the nuns lose him?”

“I could have done more, I guess.” She understood: since she had put responsibility on the nuns, it was safe now for him to acknowledge his own role in it all. “Should’ve stayed the whole time. I could have impersonated a doctor, handed him over to the right parents, myself. That’s what a proper demon would have done.”

They had been working, for several weeks now, on Crowley’s trauma narrative. The process was slow, at times frustrating, and, always, downright confounding. He insisted that all of it was true, and she mostly believed him. He insisted that all of it had occurred within her own lifetime, that she must have been aware of some of it at the time. She just couldn’t remember it--almost no one, apparently, could. He wasn’t lying, but it was a lot to take in.

For most of their time working together, Aubrey Thyme had assumed that the trauma narrative would focus around a single event, a fire, which had lasted at most a few hours. The more that Crowley talked, however, the more she realized it was far more complex than that. There had been an entire week of events which could have all, individually, been significant traumas, with a preceding eleven years of relevant build-up. It literally had been the end of the world, and Crowley
had played a starring role in it, and that sort of thing just wasn’t easy to live through.

Sometimes, she would go back and review all of her old notes, from back before she knew what she now knew. She was starting to realize just how rarely he had ever actually lied.

They had titled the book they were writing as a conceit to help him process through his trauma narrative. Crowley’s first draft for a title had been, “Anthony’s Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Week.” She had suggested he try again. His second attempt was, “The Bitter Edge Whence We Teetered.” So she had pressed him to take a third stab at it.

The more they worked on the book, the more Aubrey Thyme came to recognize the pattern to how he described things. He would oscillate between the juvenile and the sublime. He would suggest either the most immature and simplistic descriptions of things, or he would lapse, without any apparent difficulty, into literal poetry. She teased him once that she was going to assume Shakespeare had been his pen-name, and he hadn’t been amused. It took effort, for both of them, for him to find a form of expression that was both straightforward and descriptive.

The title they finally agreed to was, “When the World Didn’t End.”

After the title had been established, they moved on to the table of contents. The table of contents for Crowley’s book was:

1. An Unwanted Honor
2. Eleven Years Together
3. No Dog
4. No Leads
5. The Bandstand
6. A Big Mess
7. The Fire
8. After the Fire
9. My Bentley
10. The Kid’s Alright
11. [Redacted]
12. The Ritz
13. Retirement

This was longer than she usually wanted a trauma narrative to be. Five chapters, from her perspective, would have been better, but she had to admit that there were more than five chapters’ worth of significant events for him to describe. At first, she had assumed that he had added a redacted chapter just to ensure there were 13 chapters in total. He had assured her, however, that there was a real chapter that belonged there, that he cared deeply about it, and that he could not share it with her. He had assured her, it was a matter of life and death that he tell no one, especially not a human, especially not a human that both sides could recognize had an association with him. He had assured her, if it were anything less than his and Aziraphale’s and her own safety at risk, he would tell her what it was.

She had believed him. She hadn’t pressed. She had filed those assurances away, in the card catalog where they belonged, and she didn’t pay attention to anything she might feel about the reasoning he had given.

She still had headaches all the time. She went through aspirin too quickly. She was tired too much. She hated her tree. She kept that all to herself, of course. She kept it all filed away. She let herself cope with it on her own, personal time, and she made sure her coping did not interfere with her professional responsibilities. She got better at staying focused, while at work, despite the aches and
exhaustion.

Aubrey Thyme did her job.

“Okay, hold up.” She put the pen down, resting it against the notepad. This was how she signaled that they were about to go on a tangent. “I think we should talk about that.”

“Oh-huh,” he said, in resignation, not agreement.

“‘Proper,’” she repeated, although she probably should have repeated the whole phrase he had used. She wasn’t going to do that, though.

“That’s what I said.”

“You’re not… proper?”

He tilted his head upright, so he could look at her. “What do you think?”

She knew what she thought. “I’m asking you.”

“Of course I’m not a proper demon.”

“And how do you feel about that?”

He made a complicated, multi-note groan.

“All that, huh?” she said, dry. “How about this. Take me back to the moment where you found out the Antichrist was missing.”

He made a different, equally complicated groan.

“What were you thinking, right then?”

“I was thinking, we’re all fucked, we’re all going to die, the world is ending.”

“Right. Yep.” That hadn’t been a surprise. That, she had learned as they worked on the book, was a distraction, a stalling tactic. “What were you thinking, about yourself?”

“I was thinking lots of things.”

“So let’s go through them.”

“Now that it’s all done and over, of course, I think it all went down exactly as She wanted it to.”

She had asked for his contemporaneous judgments, and he hadn’t provided that, but she was also very interested whenever he made references to Her. It was annoying, just how good he was at offering distractions. “Is that a good thing?”

He thought about that. “Not sure. Can’t say.” His lips twitched just slightly, downwards. He leaned back so he was looking upwards again. “Or, well, it’s Her, so of course it’s good, couldn’t be otherwise.”

“You really believe that?” she asked, because she was surprised. Because she couldn’t believe that Crowley, of all people, had started to sound a little starstruck.

“Eh,” he said. She decided she wasn’t going to push the issue. Not now.
“Back then. Day of the--” She paused to check her notes. “--The birthday party? You learned the Antichrist was missing. What did you think about yourself?”

“I thought…” he started. He was looking upwards, still, not at her, but she could see how his jaw was working. She could see the fingers on his hands curl inwards, the fingernails scraping against the fabric of his chair’s armrests. He was working himself up to being honest. It was always a physical process, for him.

“I thought,” he repeated, before going on. His voice was quiet. “I ruin everything I touch.”

She let out a heavy breath, like the sound of being punched. That was how she expected it must have felt for him to say that out loud. “Ouch,” she said.

“Eh,” he said, or rather mumbled, as if he could take back the honesty he had just given. He raised a hand up and made a waving gesture, as if trying to brush his words out of the air around him.

“It hurts to think things like that,” she said, because it was true, because clients like Crowley often needed to be reminded of things that were true. “But the fact that we think it doesn’t make it true.”

He didn’t respond.

“Is it true?” she asked. She wanted to hear him give the answer, give the true answer. She wanted him to hear him give the answer.

“...Eh,” he said. He made another waving gesture, as if it was now her question that he wanted to remove from the air around him.

“Scale of one to ten,” she pushed. “How true is it that you ruin everything you touch?”

He was still and quiet, head facing up, for a full ten seconds. Then he breathed in deeply and repositioned himself. He moved to a more upright position, his more usual sprawl. She saw that his face was slack with some deep emotion, like concern. He was looking at her.

“One to ten,” she repeated, quiet. Her head was aching.

“You can prove me wrong, you know.” He said it like he was imploring.

“Aziraphale,” she replied, quick and ready. Too quick and ready. She should have pushed him, again, to tell her where his belief fell on the scale. She shouldn’t have risen to his bait, accepted his test. But the look on his face was making her feel very tired, or something like tired, and she didn’t want to try to think through why he had said what he said, what it could be code for, what he was trying to get her to understand. There was nothing he could be saying that she needed to understand.

“He doesn’t count.”

“Of course he counts,” she said, now letting herself feel annoyed rather than tired. “You can’t discount evidence just because it goes against your hypothesis.”

He smiled at her. It was a sad smile. It was a meaningful smile, or, at least, a smile that looked like he meant it to be meaningful. She refused to explore its meaning. She couldn’t let herself explore its meaning.

Aubrey Thyme was a professional. She was also a human, and she was going through a rough time, personally. She was putting a lot of time into coping when she was at home, on her own time, but
not at work. She did not let her coping interfere with her professional responsibilities. She was careful. She was in control. And so, there was nothing that her client, Crowley, could be trying to say to her. There was nothing he could know about her personal time that he could be trying to talk to her about, trying to say with that fucking sad smile of his. There was nothing to it.

“It’s not too late, Herb,” he said, and he was quiet, and he was sad, and she needed to be on her own so she would be able to cope, because he was making her need to cope.

“Just prove me wrong,” he implored.

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“I think we should do something different today,” he said, as he was sitting down. He said it with a confident, casual tone, which made her understand that this was something he had planned.

“And what’s that?” she asked, ready to humor him.

“I think, you should screen me.” He nodded, satisfied with his plan, and he slapped his hands against his chair’s armrests. “Alcoholism. Screen me for alcoholism.”

“Really?” She was surprised. They had spoken about his alcohol consumption in the past, and he had been quite clear that he was satisfied with his habits. “Has something changed recently, or…?”

“Well, you know, better safe than sorry,” he said, with a too-casual nod to his head. “Isn’t alcoholism a pretty common response to traumatic experiences? That’s what I read, at least.”

Anthony J. Crowley, that petulant, childish, rebellion-shaped-like-a-man son of a bitch was sitting across from her, and he had just admitted to reading. She pressed her tongue against one of her canines, watching him, as he watched her.

Aubrey Thyme did not want to screen him for alcohol use disorder. Aubrey Thyme did not want to screen anyone for alcohol use disorder. Aubrey Thyme did not want to think about alcohol use disorder.

“Come on,” he said, and there was something of an undercurrent to his tone, “It’ll be fun.”

It wouldn’t be fun. Alcohol use disorder screenings are not fun. No one thought they were fun. The way he said it, he certainly did not actually expect it to be fun. He said it like a dare, or maybe a taunt. She didn’t like that.

“Fine,” she said. She crossed one leg over the other, shifting in her seat, and she rested her chin on her hand. He won. “How many nights a week, would you say, do you drink?”

“Hm,” he said, as if he was dissatisfied with the question, as if this wasn’t exactly what he had just asked for. He sounded like his plan wasn’t going the way he wanted. She didn’t like that he had a plan. “Shouldn’t you have a checklist or something?”

“That comes later.”

“No, I’d really like us to have a checklist.” He clicked his tongue against his teeth a few times, as if thinking, and he started swivelling his head, looking around her office. “Someone as devout as you surely must have a Bible around here somewhere…”

She raised an eyebrow at him.
“Ah! There it is,” he said, apparently spotting what he wanted. He tumbled out of his seat in a way that somehow led to him being fully upright, and he moved over to the bookshelf by her desk. She didn’t like him interacting with her bookshelf, or her books, or any of her things, really, but she did nothing to stop him. He reached, and he pulled *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*, from her shelf.

The DSM doesn’t provide an assessment to screen for alcohol use disorder. There were plenty of screening tools available, and she could have pointed him to where she kept the ones she used, but she didn’t. This was his plan, his game, so she’d let him play by his rules.

“Right,” he said, sitting back down, the DSM in his lap. He started flipping through it. “Alcohol… Alcohol…” He frowned, looked up at her. “How is this not in alphabetical order?”

She snorted out a laugh. “Page four-eighty. It’s somewhere around there.”

He nodded and flipped to that page. “‘Substance-Related and Addictive Disorders,’” he read out the title. “Sounds about right, doesn’t it?”

She could tell he was starting to read through the page. At this rate, it would take him all day to find what he wanted. She held out a hand. “Give it to me.”

“No,” he said, and he pulled the DSM closer to himself. This was his game, and he was going to play it by his rules. “I’ll find it.”

“You’re several pages off. Just look for the heading, Alcohol Use Disorder.”

“Hm…” He said, as he followed her advice. “There we go! ‘Alcohol-Related Disorders.’ Alcohol Use Disorder, right under it. Now, why not just call it alcoholism, I wonder?”

She shrugged. There were reasons. But she could tell he wasn’t actually interested.

“Alright,” he said, settling in, cradling the heavy book in his lap. She couldn’t imagine it was pleasant, reading such a technical text while wearing sunglasses. “‘Diagnostic Criteria,’” he read out, and then he looked up at her, to see if she was paying attention.

She showed that she was. She also showed that she was not amused.

“‘A problematic pattern of alcohol use leading to clinically significant impairment or distress, as manifested by at least two of the following, occurring within a twelve month period…’” He paused there. He looked up at her. “So, we’re looking for at least two problems within the last year.”

“Clinically-significant problems,” she clarified.

“Hm,” he said, sounding dissatisfied. He went back to reading. “‘One. Alcohol is often taken in larger amounts or over a longer period than was intended.’” He looked up at her.

“Well?”

“What do you think that would be like?” he asked. He asked it, like he wanted her to imagine it, and she really wasn’t amused.

“You tell me,” she said.

He kept on looking at her for a few more seconds, but he didn’t respond. He turned back to the book. “‘Two. There is a persistent desire or unsuccessful efforts to cut down or control alcohol
use.’ Now, that one’s not relevant,” he judged, without even pausing, as if it were obvious.

“‘Three. A great deal of time is spent in activities necessary to obtain alcohol, use alcohol, or recover from its effects.’ Now, this one. This one is interesting, wouldn’t you say?” He looked back up at her.

“Why do you say that?” she asked.

“What do you think counts as ‘a great deal of time’?”

“What do you think?”

“Well, how would I know?” He asked, and there was a feigned innocence to the question that put her teeth on edge. “I’d need a comparison, wouldn’t I? Can’t tell if you’re putting a great deal of time into something, unless you know how much time others put into it, can you?”

She didn’t respond. Her head was still propped up by her hand. She still wasn’t amused.

“So, give me a comparison, Herb.” He tilted his head, just slightly, to indicate how closely he was looking at her. “How about yourself?” he asked, and he asked it like it was an idea that just popped into his head. Clearly it wasn’t, and she was getting pissed off. “Tell me how much time you spend in… ‘activities necessary to obtain alcohol, use alcohol, or recover from its effects.’”

She didn’t respond.

“Just so I can use it as a comparison,” he said, cool and calm. Too cool and calm. “That’s all.”

Weren’t people always getting into trouble, playing games by a demon’s rules? Shouldn’t she have recognized that much earlier?

“What’s this about?” She asked, and her voice was dark. She re-positioned herself, sitting up straighter. She was poised to strike if necessary.

“We’re just checking to see if I’ve developed alcohol use disorder, aren’t we?” His voice was so simple, so saccharine and innocent, and his expression was so perfectly innocent, as if he were hiding nothing, as if there was nothing below the surface, as if he weren’t daring her to see right through him. “Just part of your professional duties, isn’t it? Making sure your client hasn’t developed any self-destructive tendencies?”

“What is this about, Anthony,” she insisted, feeling now even darker.

He kept looking at her. He kept staring at her. His jaw worked, and she recognized the way his jaw was working, because it was working the way it used to, when he couldn’t tell her the truth, when there were too many things being left unsaid, when he was navigating conversations they couldn’t actually have.

“You tell me.”

He laid those words out in the space between them, low and thick, and they affected her like shears cutting through too-tight wire. She felt it, the rise of a burning anger that she had been ignoring, denying, hiding away since he first mentioned alcoholism. She hissed in a breath through clenched teeth, and she felt like sneering.

“You keeping tabs on me?” she asked–no, accused.

“What?” He looked taken aback, and it was less than he deserved.
"You following me?"

"Of course not," he said, and he had the audacity to look askance, to look like she was the one who had offended him.

"Bullshit," she said. "This is bullshit. Whatever you think you're doing, you have no right."

"What I think I'm doing?" he repeated.

"It's called stalking," she felt like growling. "It's a complete violation. It is--"

He cut her off with a deep, shocked laugh. He laughed. He laughed at her. He shook his head, with that laugh, a laugh that said, I can't believe you're such an idiot, and it was precisely the sort of laugh that got the words Get out of my office and never return ready on her lips--but, before she could let them out, he was taking off his sunglasses. He took off his sunglasses, and he looked her straight in the eye, and there was a kindness to his eyes, a sweetness to them, which made her realize she had misinterpreted his laugh.

"I am not stalking you, Aubrey," he said, and he was honest. It was the kind of honesty that was calming. It was stabilizing. She hated it. She hated that it worked.

She leaned back, a little, in her chair.

"I wouldn't do that." He closed the DSM in his lap, his interest in it completely dissolved. He discarded it on the end table beside his chair. "It would be a complete violation, you're right. Which is why I wouldn't do that."

She had to admit, she knew that about him.

"It's just--don't you get it?" He looked off to the side, as if he was trying to think. Then he turned back to her, and he leaned forward in his chair. "I may be retired, but I have over six thousand years of experience under my belt, Aubrey."

He paused, to give her a chance to respond. She didn’t.

"I invented humanity's self-destructive tendencies. You think I can't spot them?"

That felt like a wound, and she worked hard to keep it from showing.

"You think I can't tell, when I inspire them?"

He was waiting, again, for her to respond. She breathed in, deeply, and then she breathed out. She felt very tired, and she had a headache, and she needed to cope, and that was exactly what he was forcing her to think about.

"Crowley," she said, soft but firm. The good news was, she had a script to follow for this sort of thing. She had never experienced this, precisely, but close enough. She could follow the script. "Thank you for your concern. The relationship between us is a really important one, and I take your concern to show just how much the work we are doing in here matters for you. And let's be very clear, it is a professional relationship between us."

"Yep," he nodded, in complete, ready agreement. "That's right. This is professional."

That wasn’t part of the script. When she had to give this speech to a client, he was supposed to look a bit sad or hurt, a bit ashamed, and then they could process through that. He wasn’t supposed
to be so perfectly acquiescent.

She narrowed her eyes at him.

She had the suspicion that this wasn’t part of his original plan. He had come in here, with a plan—or, perhaps, more likely, half a plan and trust in his ability to improvise. Then, improvise he had. He had shifted his approach, easy as water flowing downhill. He was working, and she could identify competency when she saw it.

It is very hard to dispute someone, she could feel, when all they did was agree with you.

“We’re talking right now, one professional to another,” he said, so cool and calm, so reasonably, so competently.

She had to remind herself what they were talking about. It was something she didn’t want to talk about. It was something that had no professional significance. It was something that had no bearing on his therapeutic work, and so it was the sort of thing that should not be raised in this professional setting. It was against her code of ethics—her professional code of ethics, her personal code of ethics—to let her personal problems into the therapeutic setting.

“My personal life is my personal life,” she said.

“Well, you see...” He gave a little half-wince, the kind of wince that said, Would love to help you out, but the rules are the rules. “That’s the thing. Know how you have a professional interest in my personal life? How we spend all our time in here, talking about all sorts of private, intimate details about me? Because that’s what allows you do your job?”

He wanted her to respond, to agree. Because that’s how someone gets walked into a trap. She stayed quiet.

“My job is the same way,” he went on. “I have a professional interest in the personal lives of those who are currently in the process of self-destruction.”

Aubrey Thyme was a professional psychotherapist. She did her job, and she did it well. She was career-oriented, she had always been career-oriented. When he said, self-destruction, it felt like a blow to the chest.

“You’re retired,” she said.

He shrugged. “Do you think you’ll stop being a professional when you retire, Aubrey Thyme?”

She felt heavy, and out of sorts, and completely unprepared for everything that was going on. She wanted to return to feeling angry, as she had felt earlier. It would be easier, if she could be angry. It would be easier, if he would just stop saying things that were true.

“All I’m asking,” he said, carefully, precisely, “is for you to take care of yourself so you actually make it to the age of retirement.”

She wasn’t an idiot. She understood. She did not specialize in substance use treatment, but she understood it. She had a professional’s understanding of the relationship between trauma and the propensity for substance abuse. She had a professional’s understanding of how alcohol abuse progressed, and how it affected the human body, and how it could completely destroy someone, even if that someone would never let it destroy her career. It wasn’t as if she had been unaware. It wasn’t as if she cared, so long as she had her career.
It wasn’t as if she knew of any other goddamned way to cope.

“We should call it quits for the day,” she said. She felt like slumping over in her chair. She felt robbed of her professional capacities. She felt bereft.

He turned his head to look at the clock. He did it very pointedly. He could be a real asshole. “We work in fifty minute increments,” he said.

“I’m no use to you today. You--” She was about to say, you’ve ruined me. She hoped he couldn’t tell. “You’ve worn me out.”

“So let’s just talk,” he said, with a shrug, with a gesture of his hands that said, here is what I have to offer. “Talk to me, Herb.”

“No,” she said. It wasn’t a rejection. It had no bite, it wasn’t a demand. It was just ground rules.

“One professional to another,” he tried again. He looked at her, hopeful, kind. He wanted to help. He was offering an alternative set of ground rules. All she had to do was accept. All she had to do was give in, to forget that it went against her ethical code, that it was wrong. All she had to do was let him do his job.

“No,” she repeated.

Her professionalism was her shield, but it was more than that. It was all that she had.

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The Second World War left psychologists and sociologists with a mighty big question, the sort of question that can get funded with grants, the sort of question that leads to interesting and publishable explorations of moral psychology. The question was this: just what the hell was wrong with ordinary Germans?

There was an assumption--a very easy assumption, a comforting assumption, an assumption any of us would make, in the right circumstances--that something must have been wrong with all of those ordinary Germans. They went along with evil, after all. They applauded Hitler. They had turned in their neighbors. They had participated in genocide. It is so very hard to imagine how anyone could do that, how anyone could agree to murder and torture, how anyone could excuse others of murder and torture, as well. After the Second World War, plenty of researchers sat and looked at the evidence available, and they tried to determine how something like the Holocaust could ever occur.

One classic text that came out of this research was The Authoritarian Personality. It suggested that some people are just psychologically predisposed to fascism. It was a personality trait, the willingness to follow authorities, and it just so happened that Germany was filled to the brim with people who had this personality trait.

The book was wrong. Offensive, really. Ordinary Germans, even during the Holocaust, were just that: ordinary.

Seventy years of empirical social psychology later, including a variety of very theatrical and unethetical studies that every introductory psychology student enjoys learning about, and we have come to understand that, really, there is nothing special about the capacity for evil. It is, in fact, extremely easy to get a human to go against her moral code, to do what she believes to be wrong. It doesn’t require temptation; it doesn’t require a supernatural entity whispering in one’s ear. It just requires the right set of circumstances, the right set of external conditions. It is almost as if we
have all had the capacity within us all along, the capacity to do evil, as if it was built into us from some original blueprint.

Aubrey Thyme didn’t believe in evil. Or, perhaps, she did. It was complicated. But she did believe in social psychology. She believed in the empirical sciences. She believed in the Milgram Experiments’ results, even if she would never have performed such experiments, herself—or if, at least, she would not want to find herself willing to perform such experiments. She believed in the power of compassion and understanding, and she believed that, perhaps, the best way to avoid ever committing evil was by working to understand it, what led to it, how it was motivated, and how it was a perfectly natural, perfectly human response to certain types of circumstances. Aubrey Thyme believed, or at least she attempted to believe, that the best way to avoid going against one’s own moral code was simply to avoid the types of circumstances that would lead to one doing so.

Getting a human to do what she believes to be wrong doesn’t require appealing to her base instincts. You don’t have to flash all her heart’s desires before her. You merely have to provide the hint of an expectation. You merely have to suggest that, perhaps, there is no reasonable alternative. And it is easiest of all, really, when the human is already scared and alone, needy, at wit’s end, confused and addled.

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Three weeks. They continued working on his trauma narrative. It was slow work. They were going very slowly. It was appropriate, for this sort of work, to go slowly.

Three weeks, and every session he gave her this certain type of look, like he knew. Like he knew that she knew. Like all he had to do was wait.

Crowley, she started to understand, had substantial professional experience with waiting.

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She invited him into her office. She closed the door behind him. She stayed by the door until he was sprawled out in his chair, and then she moved to sit down in her chair.

She looked at him. He was waiting for her.

“Look,” she said. She was shaky. She wasn’t shaky. Maybe her voice was shaky. She could control it. “Let’s talk about the tree.”

His immediate response was to take off his sunglasses, fold them up, and put them in his jacket pocket. She hated that. She wanted him to keep his sunglasses on. She didn’t want to look him in the eye. He nodded at her.

“You know plants, right?” This was justification. Rationalization. She understood exactly what she was doing.

“Been working with them for six thousand years,” he said. He understood exactly what she was doing.

What she was doing was wrong. She hated herself for it.

“It’s not doing well,” she said. Her voice was shaking.

“I know,” he said.
“You said it was blessed, didn’t you? You said everything in here was blessed, blessed more than anything had been for several centuries.” That wasn’t what he had said. They both knew that wasn’t what he had said. This was wrong. “Shouldn’t it be doing fine?”

He smiled at her. It was a sad smile. It was a compassionate smile. “That’s not how blessings work, I’m afraid. They give a leg up on certain things. I bet your tree hasn’t had trouble finding good parking spots lately—” This was ridiculous. “—And I bet, if it has suffered any injuries, it’s been surprised how quickly it’s healed. And, also, if your tree bought a sheep, I bet it would find that all its lambs would be completely free of spots.”

She frowned.

“I know, that one hasn’t been useful in a long time. Aziraphale really did pull out all the stops.” She didn’t have anything to say to that.

“A blessing certainly doesn’t make a tree invincible. Bad things still happen to blessed trees. Blessings don’t keep trees from self-destructing. And they also aren’t the final word, when it comes to what happens after the tree dies, so you should be careful about that too.”

This really was ridiculous.

“What am I supposed to do?” she asked.

“Get a specialist?” He offered. He made a gesture around the room, this room. He wasn’t breaking the pretense, but he was making it clear what he meant.

“I couldn’t tell a specialist that…” She paused to try to find the right words. Then she realized she didn’t have to. “You know I couldn’t talk to a specialist.”

He did know. She could see it in his eyes. He couldn’t hide anything with his eyes uncovered. She could see the full extent of absolutely everything he was feeling. It was uncomfortable.

“Aziraphale?” he suggested.

“No,” she said, quick and emphatic.

“He’s harmless, I promise.”

She shook her head. “No, it’s not that…” It was that. But it was something else, as well. “He’s…” She pointed at him. “He’s connected to you. It would be too complicated.”

“It’s already complicated,” he said. He didn’t sound frustrated or demanding. She realized this was part of his professional competencies: he didn’t demand. He really could be quite kind.

What she was doing was wrong.

“Look,” he said, changing tacks. “You’re an expert, right? You know how to do your job. So… Do your job. What would you do, if you were your own client?”

She shook her head.

“If someone came in here, with everything going on with you, what would you say to them?”

“I wouldn’t even know where to start.”
“Sure you would!” His optimism was not infectious, but it was endearing.

“My job isn’t as easy as you seem to think it is,” she said.

“Never said it was easy, just said you could do it.” She watched as he got an idea. “We can try it out.”

She let him see she was suspicious.

“I’ll pretend to be you,” he went on. “And… You’ll be you, too. We’ll both be you.”

She rolled her eyes. He was starting to have fun, and she didn’t like it.

“I could put on your face, even, if you’d like. Impersonate your voice.”

“No!” She was horrified.

He grinned. He was teasing her. “Don’t worry. I wouldn’t.”

He didn’t say, *I couldn’t*. He said, *I wouldn’t*. She had to sit with that.

“Come on. Humor me.” He shifted his posture in his chair, sitting upright. He changed the way he held his hands, the way he angled his head, the way his feet touched the floor, even. She was impressed: he had skill. It was a little disturbing.

“I’m Aubrey Thyme,” he said, and he put on an American accent. He wasn’t so good at that, which was a little reassuring. Although, she wondered, perhaps he was purposefully not doing it well, just because it was reassuring. He was good at his job. “I’m not doing so well.”

He looked at her, expectantly.

Roleplaying is a central component to any successful counseling training program. Every therapist-in-training spends countless hours roleplaying with peers, taking turns being client and therapist. It is how the skills are honed, it is how the novice prepares to work with actual clients. It is, always, awkward and uncomfortable. When Aubrey Thyme had been a student, she had hated roleplaying. Everyone else she knew hated it, too. But they did it, because it was important, because it was how they learned to be professionals.

It had been a number of years since she had last roleplayed a therapeutic encounter, but there was a sense memory to it, a familiarity. She had done this, before. She was able to navigate the unpleasant awkwardness of a roleplay. She could work through it, because she remembered how to navigate it.

All of this was thoroughly ridiculous.

“Well,” she said, half willing to play along. “Tell me what’s going on.”

He had to think for a moment. She watched him, as he thought. “I haven’t actually said it out loud to anyone. I haven’t said the words. I’m not sure it would be a good thing for me to hear someone else say the words before I’ve said them, myself.”

“This is stupid,” she said.

“Uh-huh, sure, sounds about right,” he said, and he nodded his head, and *god damn*, she wondered if it was equally annoying when she did that. Actually, she admitted, she knew it was. “Humor me.”
She didn’t want to say it. It was hard to say it. She understood that meant she really did have to say it.

“I’ve been drinking way too much lately.”

He nodded his head. He smiled. “Thank you for telling me that. I really appreciate your bravery in saying that.”

That wasn’t his role. He was supposed to still be the client, she the therapist. They had completely switched roles--no, they had confused them entirely. This wasn’t a mirror image of what the therapeutic encounter should be; this wasn’t an inversion of how things should be. It was, instead, a complete annihilation of order, an obliteration of the very idea of structure. There weren’t any rules to what they were doing.

“I’ve been in the middle of a complete existential crisis,” she said.

“Hm,” he said, and he nodded again. “Tell me about that.”

She couldn’t help it: she let out a laugh. It had been a very long time since she had last laughed.

“Give me one emotion word,” he said, and now he was really leaning into making fun of her, and she could tell he was enjoying it. “Just one.”

“Adrift,” she said.

He considered. “You count ‘adrift’ as an emotion word?” He used his own accent, for that.

“Good enough,” she said.

“Okay. Adrift. Good one.” He was back to his bad American accent now. “Now, why do you think you feel adrift?”

“Because…” And it hit her that she hadn’t said it before. She hadn’t. He had been right about that. He hadn’t played her role, he hadn’t said it, because she was the one who needed to.

If she was going to say it, she was going to say it.

“Because I found out that the world nearly ended a while ago, and I don’t even remember it. I found out that heaven and hell are real, and God is real, and the other guy’s real, too, and one of my clients is a demon, and he’s friends with an angel, and they turned my fake tree into a real one, and I don’t know how to keep it alive.”

“Wow,” he said, and he said it exactly as she would have, and she rolled her eyes at him. She was starting to tear up, and rolling her eyes helped her hide it. He went on, “That really is a lot. I bet any human would have trouble taking all that in.”

“I wouldn’t say ’human.’”

“You’re not going to distract me with that.”

She rolled her eyes at him, more theatrically this time. She sniffed a little.

He picked up the box of tissues on the table beside him, held it out to her. She hated this. She took a tissue, and she wiped at her eyes.

“Thank you for sharing that with me, Aubrey Thyme.” He was looking at her. He was smiling at
her with her own smile, her carefully-crafted professional smile, which somehow fit on his face despite his too-sharp teeth. “It means a lot to me that you would be willing to share that with me.”

“It doesn’t make me any better,” she said. She shrugged at him as a display of the nihilism she had been feeling for the past several months. But, as she did it, she could also recognize it had a bit less of a hold on her. “I’m not instantly healed.”

“No, that’s not how therapy works,” he said, with the specific tone of voice she used when she offered psychoeducation like this. “It’s all a very slow process. But telling the truth is often the first step. And, you’re an expert, aren’t you? You know how to take care of yourself.”

“Hm,” she said.

“You can talk to a mirror, if I’m not around.”

She snorted.

“Take care of yourself, Herb.” It was his accent, his inflection, his voice. He was looking at her.

She watched him, as he settled back into his customary sprawl. She watched, as he settled back into his role of the client. Which meant she was back to her role of the therapist. She crumpled the tissue up in her hand.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“I’m a demon,” he said.

“You’re good at what you do,” she said.

“So are you.”

The good news, so far as Aubrey Thyme could see it, was that whatever mistakes occurred as part of a therapeutic encounter could be corrected. This was a central belief she held, and she could tell that her client, Crowley, understood it as well: honest interaction within the therapeutic setting can undo past harms; the unflinching acceptance of compassionate truth-telling can mend a frayed relationship, no matter what. Even the worst fracture in the therapeutic alliance could be healed, with enough honesty, compassion, and hard work.

Who knows. Maybe she’d start going to AA. Although, she rankled at all their talk of ‘a higher power.’ There were other support groups. She would find something. She could figure that all out on her own time. Right now, she was at work.

“I mean…” Crowley was talking again. She could tell by his tone of voice, he was going to throw a petty insult at her. He was going to throw a petty insult at her, because that’s what he did when he wanted to signal to her that their therapeutic alliance was particularly strong. “I say you’re good at your job, but then again, it is taking us an awfully long time to get this blasted book finished, isn’t it?”

“Uh-huh, sure,” she said. She was accepting his banter.

“And just move your tree over to the window, that’s all it needs.”

She thought, maybe she’d listen.
There was something she had to do, and she had been putting it off. She had been putting it off, because she didn’t want to do it, because it was easier to put it off than to do it. She had put it off until the point when she felt like she couldn’t safely put it off any longer. She had to do it before it was too late for her to do it right.

“There’s something I want to talk about before we get started,” she said, at the start of the session, after they had both sat down. “Just a heads up.”

“Okay, sure,” he said.

“I’m going to be unavailable for a month,” she said.

“Oh,” he said. And then he looked at her.

There was this thing he did, this specific way he had of looking at her. When he did it, it felt like there was a warping to the room’s air, like everything had grown just slightly too still, like he was purposefully restructuring the space between them. She didn’t know if he actually was doing any of that. She didn’t know if this was some sort of demonic thing, or if what she felt was just an emotional reaction to some subtle set of microexpressions and shifts in his posture. She couldn’t tell. All she knew was, he had done this at some point or another in each session since they had talked about the tree, and he did it on purpose. He did it, and he did it on purpose, and when he did it, she knew that he was saying, I can see you, and I can listen.

It set her teeth on edge, every time he did it. It set her teeth on edge, and he must have known that it did, but he kept doing it anyway.

The tree was over by the window, these days.

“We’ll meet next week, and the week after that, and then we’ll be taking a month-long break,” she said.

“Sure.”

“We’ve never taken a break that long.” They had never taken a break, at all. Aubrey Thyme wasn’t one for vacations.

“A month’s not actually that long a time,” he said, and then he added, “Not for me.”

“You might be surprised,” she said.

According to the tri-phasic model of trauma therapy, there are three different phases to trauma
work. Not one of those phases, however, is the *Take a Month Long Break* phase. Not one of them is the *Get Halfway Through Processing the Trauma and Then Leave Your Client for a Full Month* phase. Not one of them is the *Just Go Off and Do Fuck-All* phase. And this, Aubrey Thyme knew, was because trauma processing wasn’t the sort of thing you can just half-ass. It can be risky. Trauma sits in the brain, like an eternal and nightmarish actuality, and trauma processing requires working with that nightmare, confronting it, not ignoring it but pushing on it. Trauma processing is not the sort of thing that a professional like Aubrey Thyme would want to get halfway through and then stop for a full month. Trauma processing is the sort of thing that a professional like Aubrey Thyme understood herself to have a duty to do properly, a duty that was vital for the safety and well-being of her clients. A professional like Aubrey Thyme should be able to keep fucking control of her life, so she can do better than abandon her client halfway through processing his trauma.

“Any thoughts or feelings coming up, thinking about being away for a month?” she asked.

“What about you?” He was still looking at her. He was still doing the *thing*.

This was part of their dynamic, when he was doing the *thing*. His honesty became currency. He held her to high prices.

She shifted her eyes over to the tree, just let them flick in that direction for a quick second. It wasn’t an answer, but it was.

“I’m not going to ask where you’re going,” he said, like it was reassuring, like it was an expression of some shared ground rules.

“I didn’t say I was going anywhere,” she said, because it was reassuring, because it was an expression of her actual ground rules. “And you didn’t answer my question. Any thoughts or feelings about this?”

“Naw,” he said. “Sounds good, actually.”

If Aubrey Thyme could, she would completely ban the words *good* and *bad* from Crowley’s vocabulary. Sometimes he used *good* to mean *bad*, but, also, sometimes he used *good* to mean *good*. And sometimes he used *bad* to mean *good*, but other times he used it to mean *bad*. It was confusing. It got them stuck in pointless circles.

“We both know you need a break,” he said after she hadn’t responded, and he sounded a little hesitant. He sounded a little sad, but he also sounded like he was trying to hide it. It made her stomach clench. At least, though, he stretched out. He stopped doing the *thing*.

“We can talk more about it next week, and the week after that,” she said, working to reinforce the timeline. “For now, though, how about we get to work?”

“Sure,” he said. He got prepared, settling into his chair, getting comfortable.

Aubrey Thyme had a plan, or at least part of one. She would have them work on the book today, but then they wouldn’t the next session, or the session after that. They would work on the book today, and she believed the chapter they were set to work on would be good enough for her plan. It wasn’t the best chapter for them to work on, not for her plan—if she had started planning earlier, she could have managed things so the last chapter they focused on, before she abandoned him for a month, was *The Ritz* or *Retirement*. But at least they weren’t on the very central chapters, *The Fire* and *After the Fire*. The chapter they were on, while not ideal, would give her what she needed for her plan to work. Or, at least, she felt reasonably assured it would.
She knew the outline of events in Crowley’s trauma narrative, at least in broad strokes. She knew the chapter they were set to work on today involved a disagreement between Crowley and Aziraphale. She also knew, from significant experience by this point, that just about every single story Crowley had to tell about himself and Aziraphale involved them disagreeing, bickering, sniping back and forth. She knew how he smiled when he told these stories, how he lit up even as he acted frustrated and annoyed. She knew that he liked and admired Aziraphale’s spunk. And that, she thought, was something she could plan around.

So, for this session, as the last time they would work with the trauma narrative before she abandoned him for a month, her plan was to focus on a section of the book which, she believed, would highlight Aziraphale’s spunk, the loving dynamic they managed to maintain through gripes and huffy disputes. That was her plan.

“Okay,” she said, when she was ready to begin. “Let’s work on Chapter Five, *The Bandstand.*”

They got to work.

After the hour was up, after he had fleshed out the chapter, after he had recounted everything he remembered about what he had said and everything he remembered about what Aziraphale had said, after they had ended and he had left, Aubrey Thyme slumped down in her chair.

*Well, fuck,* she thought. It had been a crap plan.

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As a general rule, psychotherapists do not approve of euphemism. Euphemism stands in the way of truth. It stands in the way of clarity. Euphemism comes with plausible deniability, and plausible deniability rarely has therapeutic value. Euphemism, in certain circumstances, can be dangerous.

What psychotherapists have, in place of euphemism, is technical terminology. They have a full language that allows them to discuss the most challenging topics with less pain than those topics deserve. They know what they mean, when they use their technical terminology, and they also know that the technical terminology can, sometimes, make it easier to discuss what they need to discuss with one another. They all understand the very practical implications of the painful topics they have to discuss. They give themselves the comfort of technical terminology, because they know, for some topics, they need all the comfort they can get.

What they talk about is *risk.* An individual’s risk falls on a scale, between low and high. There is no one who is *zero risk*; there is no client, in any circumstance, who is deemed to be completely free of risk. Everyone, at all times, is at least low risk.

What psychotherapists do is complete *risk assessments.* They do this by asking questions, questions which have none of the euphemism, none of the safety provided by technical terminology. They ask questions that are blunt and direct, because these are the questions that allow them to establish a client’s level of risk.

The questions they ask are: Do you ever think of killing yourself? Have you in the past? Do you ever think of hurting or killing others? Have you in the past?

They ask these questions, because it is their job to ask these questions. They ask these questions because they need to know the answers, because it is their duty, above all else, to protect their client’s lives. They ask these questions, and they take them seriously, because there are so many for whom the answer is yes.
The fact that someone answers yes to any of those questions does not mean that they are high risk. Suicidal ideation--thinking about one's own death--is, in fact, fairly common. Answering yes to these questions does not mean the client is in crisis--another not-euphemism, another way of describing something terrifying and all too common for a professional therapist. Answering yes, instead, simply leads to a variety of additional questions, and one’s answers to those questions determines where one falls in terms of risk.

Clients do not always take the risk assessment questions seriously. They do not want to take them seriously. Some clients do not want to believe that those questions could be relevant to themselves, and others do not want to have to give the truthful answers. So, they joke. They give silly, funny answers, as if the topic could be funny, as if their answers couldn’t actually matter, as if it would never even occur to them that their therapist would have to take even those jokey, silly answers seriously. They joke and they have fun, because they haven’t sat with a client in crisis, they haven’t lost a client to pointless death, they haven’t spent months or years in therapy of their own, trying to look back and figure out how they had failed someone in their care so seriously.

When Aubrey Thyme first sat down with Crowley, that first session they spent together, when he had asked about Oedipus and she had taught him a grounding technique, she had performed her risk assessment. She had asked her questions, blunt and to the point, and he had not joked. He had not laughed. He had taken the questions seriously.

He had taken the questions seriously, and he had lied through his teeth about them.

She had been able to tell that he was lying about his answers. She had pushed him on it--gently, carefully, because they had not formed a therapeutic alliance yet, because he had been so angry and untrusting back then. But she had pushed him, and he had kept lying. There comes a point, when someone is lying to you, when there’s nothing you can do but accept their lies.

She had put him at low risk.

For a client who is low risk, a therapist might not ever ask those blunt questions again. But risk assessment was never a one-and-done sort of thing. Risk assessment begins with blunt and awkward questions, and then it continues, regularly, session after session, through any variety of careful observations and less direct inquiries.

Aubrey Thyme still put Crowley at low risk.

At least, Aubrey Thyme put Crowley at low risk for suicidality. Homicidal ideation was a completely different matter. She supposed that she could successfully count him as low risk of homicidality, given that he never presented any realistic fantasies about harming specific, identifiable humans. She was willing to accept that that was perhaps the best that could be asked for, for a demon.

The fact that, from Aubrey Thyme’s professional opinion, Crowley was low risk did not leave her too reassured, in light of her upcoming month-long absence. She thought, perhaps, it should leave her more reassured. She thought, perhaps, that the growing concerns she had about him, along with all the rest of her clients, said more about her own control issues than anything going on with their actual risk levels. But, still, she wasn’t reassured.

Related to an individual’s level of risk were the client’s risk factors. There are certain factors to an individual’s personality, life history, and external circumstances that make it statistically more likely that he will kill himself. And Crowley, for his part, had a variety of risk factors. The biggest one, in Aubrey Thyme’s professional opinion, was his impulsivity. Anthony J. Crowley had an impulsive streak a mile wide. He was impulsive, and he was prone to fits of despair, and he was
halfway through the painful and distressing process of working through his trauma narrative. And it just so happens that the mixture of pain and distress in someone with an impulsive streak a mile wide who is also prone to fits of despair could be very, very bad.

Still, Crowley was low risk. Along with his risk factors, he also had a significant protective factor, or something that lowered the statistical likelihood that he would hurt himself. It was preferable, of course, for an individual to have a wide variety of distinct protective factors, but Crowley was different. Crowley may have had only one significant protective factor, but the protective factor he had was the most powerful fucking thing Aubrey Thyme had ever encountered. Crowley was low risk, and she believed he would likely remain low risk, so long as the whole of his life could stay comfortably curled around Aziraphale.

All she wanted to do, all she wanted before she left him on his own for a full goddamned month, was to reinforce the meaningfulness and significance of his connection to Aziraphale as much as possible. Let him lean into Aziraphale fully and completely, and she could feel safe leaving him for a full month.

There is no such thing as no risk, there is only ever low risk.

Her plan had been a crap plan. It would have been a better plan, less prone to failure, if she hadn’t put off talking to him about her impending time away for so long. And, now, she only had two sessions to come up with something better.

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“I’ve got a handout for you today,” she said, at the start of the next session.

“Oh,” he said.

There had been a time when she would have interpreted that as a sarcastic response, but she knew better by now. She knew, by now, just how much Crowley enjoyed handouts. He loved them. He loved that, sometimes, they had typographical errors, and then he could hold the handout up and point them out to her until he had completely pissed her off. He loved that, sometimes, they were print-outs of scans of photocopies, and he could pretend not to be able to read the words on the page. He loved that, sometimes, the images didn’t line up with the text. One time, a handout had been in comic sans, and that had made his whole day.

Aubrey Thyme did not make these handouts. She never would have chosen comic sans. She didn’t make typographical errors. He still loved giving her grief about it, though.

“You’re really going to like this one,” she said, hamming it up, knowing just what cards she had in her deck. “It’s from a self-help book.”

“Oh,” he said, even more enticed. “Sounds horrible.”

She was holding the handout upside down, so he couldn’t see it. She handed it over to him, upside down, as well. He could only see what the handout was, once it was in his hand and he had flipped it over.

“Oh, this is shit,” he pronounced with dismay as soon as he saw what it was. But it was too late: it was already in his hands. He was stuck with it now.

“I know,” she said, and she couldn’t help but grin. She couldn’t help but grin, because it really was shit, and maybe she’d hammed it up a bit more than necessary just because she knew she would get that reaction from him. “We’re going to talk about it anyway.”
The Five Love Languages was published in 1992. It was, in Aubrey Thyme’s professional opinion, just as it apparently was in Crowley’s, shit. It was crap. It was bullshit. It is not, in her opinion, the lowest of the low of self-help nonsense, but it was pretty low. However, she also knew, sometimes even bullshit could be helpful. Sometimes, when you’ve got a pesky nail to deal with, you just need any hammer, not necessarily a good one.

“So, what is it?” he asked, putting no effort into reading it at all.

“It’s just a way of describing how some people go about expressing their feelings for those they care about.” Love, the handout said. The word used was love. But she didn’t say that. “Different people express how much they care for others in different ways.”

The best element of The Five Love Languages, in Aubrey Thyme’s professional opinion, was the accuracy of the title: you're promised five love languages, and that’s exactly how many you got. The five languages were:

- Words of affirmation;
- Gift-giving;
- Acts of service;
- Quality time;
- Physical touch.

“Some people,” she continued, “are really good at showing how much they care about someone in one of these ways, but not in others. And, sometimes, someone might not even realize that someone else is trying to show how much they care, just because the two of them expect care to be expressed in different ways. Go ahead, look it over.”

She gave him a pointed look until he gave in and started reading it. This was one of the more professionally designed handouts she had, unfortunately, which meant there weren’t any typos for him to find. It wasn’t as fun as he had hoped.

“Alright,” he said, resigned, and he leaned back a bit in his chair. “I know what you’re getting at.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“Me and Aziraphale.”

“Uh-huh,” she said, using the full extent of her professional skill to bite back the *no duh* that had settled in her throat. “So what do you think about it?”

He shrugged. It was either a thoughtful shrug, or it was a bored one. Those two states could be remarkably similar, for him.

“Can you recognize yourself in any of those?” she asked.

He gave in. He actually started considering the different languages described. He made small clicking noises with his tongue, as he looked at them.

“Don’t know,” he said, still looking at his options. “Maybe all of them? Maybe none? Can’t tell.”

*Are you fucking kidding me,* she thought. “It can be subtle sometimes,” she said.

“Words of affirmation are right out.” He got that right, at least.

“Look, there’s a quiz you can take.” It wasn’t an assessment, it wasn’t a screening, it wasn’t a test.
It was a *quiz*, for fuck’s sake. But she could sweeten the pot: “Oprah took it live on TV once.”

“Ooh.” His tastes, while not simple, were at least remarkably predictable.

She already had it, ready to go, on her end table. She handed it to him, along with a clipboard and a pen. She watched, as he took it, as he counted up his score, as he looked at the results.

“Huh,” he said.

“Acts of service,” she said. He hadn’t shown her his score, but really, come on.

“I suppose…”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And there was that time…”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And I…” He stopped himself, looked up. “You’re not surprised.”

“Crowley,” she said, and she couldn’t help but laugh a little. “I don’t know how you could be any more obvious.”

He seemed to accept that. “What do you think Aziraphale is?”

“You know him better than I do, what do you think?”

He ended up taking the quiz again, this time with what he imagined Aziraphale would say.

“He got a tie,” Crowley said, when he was finished, sounding offended by the result. “Both acts of service and quality time.”

“That happens sometimes.” It did. The quiz was bullshit. “Does it sound right to you?”

He didn’t respond, because he was thinking. He was thinking, and his face was turning downwards, like he was confused, like he didn’t know what to think. He was thinking, and she was starting to worry that his thinking wasn’t going to way she wanted it to.

She decided to direct: “Can you come up with any examples where he showed you how he cared about you, in one of those ways?”

Now his brow was furrowed, now his lips pursed. He wasn’t looking towards her. He was looking away.

*Well, fuck,* she thought. She’d try a different route: “Maybe you can share with me, some of the ways you’ve shown him how you care over the years?”

“Where’s my book?” he asked, suddenly intent, and, no, that was not okay.

“I wanted to put off working on it until I got back.”

“Fine, but let me see it.”

She didn’t want to let him see it.

“Can I ask why?” she asked, trying to sound uncommitted.
“I just want to see it.”

“Yes, but why?”

“It’s my book, let me see it.” He was getting agitated now. He was starting to fidget, and his expression had hardened. She didn’t want him to see the book, but she also didn’t want him growing upset.

“How about I get out the book, but I keep hold of it?”

“Fine, sure.”

She stood, moved to the filing cabinet where she kept it, and she got it out. She brought back, sat down with it. She held it in her lap, working to limit his view of it.

“Okay,” he said, leaning forward, wanting access to his half-done trauma narrative. “Read back to me what we did last time.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“No, it’s fine,” he said, a bit too quickly for it to really be fine. “I’m just curious -- just, read it back to me.”

She frowned at him.

What had left her the most worried, after their last session, was his affect as they worked through The Bandstand. What he had recounted must have hurt--it must have--but he denied it. He denied any distress, and he expressed none, either. That was what had left her the most worried. If he had cried, if he had screamed, if he had given any indication that he had access to the deep pain that must be associated with The Bandstand, she would have been less worried. She could control his pain, if he experienced it in session with her. She could not control it, if it came out anywhere other than her office. She especially could not control it, if it came out while she was gone for a whole fucking month.

“It’s my book, Herb, come on,” he insisted.

She considered her options. If she refused, then that would be the whole rest of the session: he would be angry, she would be angry, and she would have no chance of getting his attention back where she wanted it. If she relented, on the other hand, then there was a strong likelihood that this session would not be the easy, lighthearted session she wanted. Perhaps, however, he would get to feel the strong emotions he had denied last time, and then she would be a bit reassured. Additionally, she thought, if she was very careful and just a bit lucky, she could actually pull the conversation back to where she wanted it. It was worth a shot.

“Okay, you win,” she sighed out. She flipped through the papers, until she found the work they had done for The Bandstand.

She gave him one final look of warning, and he gestured to hurry her along.

So she read.

“Aziraphale and I met up at the bandstand,” she read aloud. “I wanted him to go to Alpha Centauri with me. He wanted to go, too. I told him I’d make sure he was safe. I told him we would both be safe out there. I told him that, if he couldn’t trust me after all this time, then what was even the point? The world was ending, and I just wanted to keep him safe. I told him that we were on our
own side, not either of the other two.”

She paused there. She looked up to him. He looked like he was concentrating.

Crowley hated his book. She knew he hated it. He hated that she wouldn’t let him include any actual goddamn sonnets but also wouldn’t let him turn it into a joke. He hated that she wouldn’t let him rip it into shreds whenever he grew frustrated. He hated all of it, and she knew this. He looked, currently, like he was too distracted to pay attention to how much he hated it. That was worrisome.

“You know,” she offered, soft and quiet, trying to pull his attention where she wanted it. “Especially after what we’ve talked about today, I can hear in these words just how much you care for him.”

He wasn’t listening. “Keep going,” he said. “I think it’s the next bit.”

Yes, it was the next bit. Of course it was the next bit. It was the next bit that she really didn’t want to read. He made the gesture again, to hurry her up.

She frowned at him again, but she returned to reading aloud: “He said he didn’t like me. He said he’d never appreciated any of the things I’d ever done for him. And he said he’d rather spend eternity with Michael and Gabriel and even that sadistic prick, Sandalphon, than admit that he liked me. He told me it was over, that he wasn’t on my side, and he’d never go anywhere with me ever again.”

She stopped there. The chapter continued, but she suspected that was the bit he had cared about. He didn’t push her to go on. He was sitting very still, and his brow was furrowed deep, and his mouth was working.

“Talk to me, Crowley.”

He just shook his head.

“Come on,” she said, her voice professional and calm and supportive. “Deep breaths. Stay with me.”

She watched him as he took the deep breaths. She watched him as he moved his face to the side. His eyes were covered, but she could imagine how they were searching around the room, searching for something to latch on to.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” she said.

“Maybe…” he started. He shook his head again. His mouth worked some more, before any more words came out. “Maybe he didn’t actually say any of that.”

“That’s a real possibility.” It was more than a possibility, in her opinion. She had, in fact, put a little asterisk next to ‘sadistic prick,’ as a reminder to go back sometime and ask him if Aziraphale would actually say something like that. She doubted, however, those were the words that had Crowley concerned. “Trauma affects our memory systems.”

It was, normally, a bad idea for her to say something like our memory systems in a session with him. As Aubrey Thyme now knew, she and Crowley had a substantial disagreement about neurology. He insisted he had none. She insisted, for her part, that he displayed consistent and predictable patterns of behavior which were perfectly in accord with the assumption that he had, at least, central, sympathetic, and parasympathetic nervous systems matching those of a human. They had agreed to disagree. And today, for this, with how preoccupied he was, she thought perhaps she
could rely on their unsteady truce.

“I don’t think he would have actually said any of that,” he said. He sounded far off and scared. He sounded like he wanted to be able to convince himself. “I know he said… He said things. I know he did. But I can’t remember now if he said those specific things.”

She repositioned herself in her seat so she was leaning a bit closer to him. Both of them were now leaning in towards the other; he needed connection.

“He said something, and it hurt, and this is how your memory recorded it,” she offered.

“And I know I left some things out,” he went on, and she wasn’t sure if he had even heard her. He pulled off his sunglasses so he could squeeze his eyes shut and rub at them with his hand. “I remember, I told him I’m unforgivable. I remember that, clear as day, I said to him, ‘Unforgivable, that’s what I am.’ I left that out last time, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, you did.”

“But why would I have said that?” He opened his eyes now, and he looked at her, and he wanted so badly for her to be able to give him the answer. “I can’t remember why I said that. I can’t… What could he have said to me, so I would say that to him?”

She couldn’t say. She hadn’t been there. The only beings who had been there had both been angry and upset, hurt and scared, suffering trauma.

“He knows I’m unforgivable, of course he does. It really is what I am. So what would have led to me saying that?”

He was starting to repeat himself. She took that as a cue. She modeled deep breathing for him, and then she spoke.

“You know, Crowley…” Since his sunglasses were off, she could seek out his eye contact. That would help him stay focused on her rather than get lost back in his looping thoughts. “We like to think that the memory is like a camera, like it just records footage, and we can go back and re-watch it whenever we want, exactly how it happened…”

He didn’t see the connection to his situation. She could see the confusion threading through his pained expression.

“It’s not like that, though. What we remember is a big mix of what really happened, and also what we felt like was happening, and what we feel about it after the fact, too.”

He nodded. He was starting to follow. His mouth hung open, and he turned his eyes away from her.

“We can’t know what he actually said. We’re not--” She had almost said, we’re not omniscient, but she didn’t want to know what she would find inside that can of worms. “We’re not going to know. What we do know, though, is that this is what you remember. Regardless of what really happened, I think this tells us how you were feeling while it happened.”

She gave him some time to think about that. Twenty seconds, he thought about that.

“Let me ask you this,” she said, knowing she was interrupting his thoughts. It was worth doing so, because she was still working towards her goal. “You wrote here, he said he didn’t appreciate the things you’ve done for him. We can interrogate that. Whether he said it or not, we can interrogate if it’s true. How’s that sound?”
His eyes turned back to her. He was listening.

“Does Aziraphale appreciate the things you do for him?”

She watched as his jaw set. It didn’t set in anger, or frustration, or pain. Instead, it set with what looked like pure certainty. He nodded his head.

“Do you think he always has?”

“Always,” he said. She could see tears starting to well in his eyes.

“That’s wonderful,” she said, and she let her voice express that she meant it. She smiled. She smiled at him. “And let me ask you this, does he invite you to spend time with him?”

“Always,” he said again, and he nodded his head, and he lifted a hand to wipe a tear from his eyes.

“Give me some examples,” she said, because she wanted him to list them. She wanted them to be fresh in his mind.

“He…” He paused for a moment to collect his thoughts and wipe at his eyes again. Crowley, she knew, was almost never willing to take a tissue. “He’s always inviting me places. Ever since, since Rome. He invited me to lunch. I’ve always been welcome in the bookshop. He... He likes picnics.”

She heard that pause, and she felt she understood what that meant. She felt she understood what it meant, because she knew plenty about Crowley’s and Aziraphale’s habits. She knew that what Aziraphale invited him to do, more than anything else, was drink wine and get drunk and then drink even more. And she would have been annoyed, deeply annoyed, to think that Crowley had thought to censor himself during a moment like this. She would have been annoyed, but she had work to do.

“So, you see?” She offered, and she ensured her voice was soft and high. She ensured that her voice took on the tone of hope. “What do you think all this means?”

He didn’t answer right away. He was busy. He was busy with the challenging task of feeling what mattered, of experiencing how much there was for him to feel.

“It means,” he said, when he could, because he had not forgotten her question, “that he’s my whole world.”

“Yes,” she agreed. She nodded in agreement. She chuckled slightly, and it was a compassionate, happy sound. “Exactly. And let me ask this… Are you his whole world?”

She could see it, the very instant the words registered with him. She could see it, because it was like a blow to him. The words registered in his body, in his shoulders and his stomach and his lungs. They registered like pain, like sorrow, like horror. They registered like that, for him, because the answer was obvious. The answer was obvious, and he couldn’t deny it, and it hurt for him to acknowledge it was true.

“Yes,” he said, and he was shaking, and he was the broken little child she so often saw him as. “Yes, I am.”

It shouldn’t hurt, to be the subject of unconditional love. It shouldn’t hurt, but it often does for those who have experienced trauma, especially those who have experienced early-life trauma at the hands of a parent. It hurts, because trauma situates itself in the brain, and it stays there, and it makes fear and horror and pain feel normal, and it makes love and acceptance and protection feel...
like a threat. Early-life trauma inverts the world, inverts one’s instincts, makes one feel safe when confronted with danger and endangered when confronted with safety. Early-life trauma, especially at the hands of a parent, could deprive you of the sense of love. It could leave you capable of appreciating and understanding and wanting to be loved, but incapable of truly feeling it, of letting it in, of getting to rejoice in it and sing its praises.

Aubrey Thyme understood what Crowley was experiencing. She understood it, as the professional she was. She understood it.

For the whole rest of the session, he didn’t do the thing. For the first time since the tree, she wasn’t confronted with the thing. And when he left, Aubrey Thyme felt just a bit more relaxed, a bit safer, a bit less at risk.

One more session to go.

Chapter End Notes

In the USA, you can call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.

In the UK, you can call Samaritans at 116 123.

In Canada, you can call Crisis Services Canada at 1-833-456-4566.

Reach out. You’re worth it.
Authenticity and Radical Choice

Chapter Summary

Aubrey Thyme needs to get away, and so she does.

“It could be a very long month,” she warned.

“Actually, just a guess, but I have the suspicion it’ll be just as long as last month,” he said like the son of a bitch he was. Then he reconsidered: “Plus or minus a day.”

Aubrey Thyme had made it through her entire case load. She had met with every single client for the last time before she abandoned them--every single one of them, except this one. It was only fitting that Crowley would be the last client she saw before she abandoned them all for a whole goddamn month. It was only fitting, and it was also enraging, because Aubrey Thyme would be lying to herself if she did not admit that she felt a special responsibility to this client in particular. Aubrey Thyme would be lying, preposterously and unconvincingly, if she didn’t admit that the alliance she had formed with Crowley was something unique, something different.

That was the whole reason she needed to get away. She knew, that was the whole reason.

“We should talk about how the month will go,” she said.

“How it will go?” he asked. He wasn’t taking this seriously. “I suspect it’ll just go, no interference from us necessary.”

“You’re real clever,” she deadpanned, and she didn’t feel like joking. “Contingency management. Let’s talk through what to do, in case something goes wrong.”

“You think something will go wrong?” And there it was, right there: that was the moment he started taking this seriously. That was the moment that he focused his attention on her. That was the moment when he did the thing.

“Contingency management,” she repeated, trying to ignore the thing.

“I’m not asking where you’re going,” he said, like he had before. “But you should tell me if you think something could go wrong.”

“I didn’t say I was going anywhere,” she replied, like she had before. “What I’m saying is, we should have a plan, in case something goes wrong for you. That’s what I’m saying.”

He was thinking about something. He was evaluating something. He was looking at her, and he was doing the thing. And then he stopped it, or at least lessened it significantly, and he shifted in his seat.

“Yeah, alright,” he said, like this was a favor to her, like he always did. “Contingency management.”

“Right.” She nodded. She needed to get away, she knew she did. She collected her thoughts. “First, let me give you something.”
She had prepared: on the end table by her chair, she had a collection of papers and a cell phone. She picked up the top paper and handed it to him. He took it, and he studied it.

“If you’re in an emergency,” she explained, “you can reach me at that number.”

“This your mobile?” he asked, sounding surprised. He kept studying the piece of paper, as if it contained some sort of message to be decoded.

“It’s a mobile,” she said, slipping into his terminology. She picked up the cell phone from the end table and displayed it, then set it back down. “I’ll have it with me. And, if you call, I’ll assume that means you’re in an emergency.”

“Uh-huh,” he said, slowly. He sounded like he had some reason to be suspicious. He sounded like he was still working through some sort of problem.

“That’s what calling that number means,” she went on. “Calling that number means you’re in the middle of an emergency.”

“You’re repeating yourself,” he said, still looking over the paper. It didn’t have enough information on it to deserve this much scrutiny.

“Well–here’s why.” She shifted a bit in her seat. She wasn’t one for vacations. She wasn’t sure how to do this. “You can send text messages. I’m going to ask you to text me, once a week, when we normally would be in session. Just to check in. How’s that sound?”

He looked back up at her, away from the paper, and she saw his lip twitch upwards, just quickly, into a smirk. “You’re going to ask?”

Oh, fuck off, she thought. “I am asking,” she said.

“One text a week.”

“Don’t expect a response.”

“Just a check in.”

“Right.”

This was apparently something he had to mull over. This was apparently something he wasn’t willing to take lightly. She watched as he folded up the piece of paper with her number on it, his movements precise and measured. She watched as he tucked it away in his jacket pocket. She had a headache today--a slight one, the first one she’d woken up with in a while--and she suspected he could tell. She suspected he could always tell, the fucker.

“I had thought,” he said, carefully, leaning forward in his seat, towards her, “that the whole point was for you to get away for a while.”

“I never said I was going anywhere,” she sighed. Nothing could ever be easy, not with Crowley.

“Just a check in, once a week.”

“And you won’t reply?” he asked. She didn’t know what answer he was looking for. He was still obviously thinking through something complex.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I guess it depends on what you say when you check in.”

“Don’t reply, unless you think you have to,” he said. He said it, like he thought he knew what she
needed. She hated that, or maybe she hated that he was right.

“That was my plan in the first place.” She felt snippy.

She felt snippy, and she felt bad for it. She felt bad for it, because this was her last client before she was leaving, and it wasn’t just any client, but this client. She felt bad for it, because she knew what he was trying to do. He was trying to be kind, he was trying to be helpful, he just wasn’t doing a good job of it. She felt bad for it, because she knew he felt bad. She could tell.

“Then we’re in agreement,” he said, and he leaned back a bit, and he sounded resigned.

“Okay,” she said. She nodded. She moved on. “One more thing.” She picked up, from the end table, a business card. She held it up, but she didn’t hold it out so he could take it. “This is something I’ve given to all my other clients. I’m not sure about you, though, so I thought we could discuss it.”

His eyebrows moved upwards. He was listening.

“This, here, is contact info for a colleague of mine,” she said.

“A colleague?” he said, with a certain tone, with his eyebrows still raised. Of course he would read into her use of the term, colleague.

“He’s willing to set up special appointments with my clients, while I’m gone, in case you feel you need to talk to someone.”

“You’re willing to send your own clients off to a competitor?” He sounded confused by it, because of course he would read into her use of the term, colleague, and of course he would assume a colleague would be a competitor.

She was still holding up the business card, and she was still holding it out of his reach. “I wasn’t sure if you’d want it.”

“May as well take it.” He said it like it was no big deal.

She kept the business card where it was. “I’ll only give it to you, though, if you promise to be nice to him.”

“I don’t do nice,” he snarled, but she could tell that it was, at best, a half-hearted snarl.

She made a show of pulling the card a bit farther away from him. “Then you don’t get Dave’s contact info.”

“Dave?” he repeated, as if it were the strangest thing he had ever heard.

“Dave,” she said.

“You expect me to be nice to someone named Dave?”

“Uh-huh.”

He rolled his eyes, and he sneered, and he held out his hand. “Give it here.”

She didn’t hand it over. “You promise?”

“I promise I won’t hurt your darling Dave,” he said, because of course he did, and of course he said
it with a certain tone, the sort of tone that made clear exactly what he was assuming. Of course he would read into her use of the term, *colleague*, and of course he would assume a colleague was a competitor, and of course there would be only one conclusion he would draw from that.

She felt an urge to correct his assumption. She felt an urge to laugh outright and say, *holy shit, Crowley, you couldn’t be more wrong*. She felt this urge, and she knew it was not at all the sort of urge she should act on. There was no reason why it should matter for her, in her professional capacities, whether her client, Anthony J. Crowley, believed that Dave was anything more than a professional acquaintance. It was, of course, therapeutically significant that he would make such an assumption—it was about as classic a case of projection as one can get outside of a textbook—but there was no professionally-relevant reason why she should feel compelled to correct his mistake. So, she didn’t.

His hand was still outstretched, waiting for the card.

“I didn’t say, don’t hurt him. I said, be nice to him,” she insisted.

“Fine. You win.” He was still sneering at her, but she knew he wasn’t really angry. “You have my word.”

She handed over the business card, and he took it. He held it in his hand, rubbing his thumb over the card stock. He read over the card thoroughly.

“What if I don’t like Dave?” he asked, still looking down at the card.

“Then you’ll be nice to him anyway, and then you’ll never have to see him again,” she answered. Dave was a sixty-something grandfather with a Santa Claus beard and an embarrassing devotion to the reggae/ska cover band in which he played the bongos. Crowley would either detest Dave or find him delightful, but she wasn’t sure which. “You don’t have to contact him at all, if you don’t want to.”

“Sure,” he said, and he was thinking. He tapped the edge of Dave’s business card against his chair’s armrest—once, twice, three times. He was thinking. “And what if I do like Dave?”

He was testing her. This felt like a test. That he felt like he needed to test her in this way made her feel heavy and tired.

“Then, great,” she said.

“What if I meet Dave, and I like him more than you?” He looked up from the card, now. He looked at her. He looked at her, and he was doing the *thing*.

She felt heavy and tired. Crowley thought he needed to test her, and she just needed to get away for a while.

“Then I can transfer your case file over to him, and you can work with him from now on,” she said.

Aubrey Thyme had always outclassed him, when it came to playing chicken.

She could see it on his face, that hadn’t been the right answer. She had hurt him, she thought, by not taking his bait, by not letting any jealousy show. She had hurt him, and she thought she saw something else pass across his face. He had been thoughtful for the entire session, up until now. He had been thoughtful, and he had seemed like he was weighing some options, making some decision or another behind the scenes. What she thought she saw pass across his face, in that
moment, was the decision being made.

The edge of Dave’s business card went tap tap tap against the armrest.

“Look,” he said. He sounded serious. He sounded like someone who had, in fact, just made a decision. “I’ve been thinking about what you said last time, about memory.”

She didn’t know how this related to Dave. She didn’t know how this related to the test she had just failed. She felt heavy and tired, and she didn’t feel like trying to follow his train of logic. He was still doing the thing.

“That so?” she offered. She’d listen.

“You were right,” he said. Dave’s card went tap tap tap. “I thought you should know that. I thought you should know, memories can change.”

He was saying things he wasn’t saying. She understood. He was watching her, to make sure she understood. She understood, and it made her spine grow cold.

“I wouldn’t,” he added quickly.

“I wouldn’t,” he said again. He took a breath.

“I wouldn’t,” he said, for the third time. “That is, unless I was asked to.”

Dave’s card went tap tap tap.

Aubrey Thyme remembered the first time Crowley suggested she should run away. It was before she had seen his eyes. Over all the time that they had worked together, he had insisted, over and over again, that she should run away. He had given his word: if she asked, he would leave. He had given his word, and he had kept giving it, over and over again, because he believed he ruined everything he touched. He believed he ruined everything he touched, and he believed he was the source of all of humanity’s problems, and maybe he was right about that. He had never stopped assuming that she should run away. He had never stopped assuming that he deserved to be asked to leave.

Aubrey Thyme listened to what he was saying. She listened, as she was mere hours from actually running away, from getting away as they both knew she needed to. She listened, and she didn’t know what to say.

“Memories don’t change what actually happened,” he went on. He stopped tapping Dave’s card so that he could gesture, with that hand, over towards the tree. “Some things can’t be undone. But memories can be.”

She didn’t know what to say, but she felt like she should say something. She opened her mouth to try to find something, anything, to say, but he cut her off.

“I’m not asking where you’re going,” he said, yet again. “I haven’t asked, and I’m not asking. You’re getting away for a month, great. You’ve got a month to sort out your priorities.”

The thing faltered. It faltered, she assumed, because he couldn’t keep it up anymore. He couldn’t keep it up, because he felt tired and scared and exposed. He couldn’t keep it up, because they both knew exactly what he was offering, and he very clearly thought she should accept.

“And I’m going to be insistent about this,” he kept going. It was odd, hearing him say he would
insist on something. He didn’t speak that way, not often. “It’s always been part of my job to get humans to be selfish. You know that, right? So, I’m going to have to insist, that you don’t pay attention to anything like what you think you should do, or what you think it would be right or good for you to do. Downright offensive to me, to base a decision like this around something like that, if you think about it.”

His jaw set. He looked away from her. She remembered, he had said, before she knew what she now knew, that he wanted to do it right. She remembered, he had said that, and she wondered if, right now, she was seeing right through him. She wondered what he would actually do, if she accepted his offer. She felt so heavy and tired.

“What I’m asking, Aubrey,” he said, with a finality that let her know his speech was coming to an end, “is for you to figure out what is in your own selfish best interest.”

Dave’s card went tap tap tap.

They both knew, she really did need a chance to get away.

She didn’t know what to say.

“So, just think about it,” he said after another moment. He sounded small, he sounded scared, he sounded guarded. He was still looking away. “Think about it, and we’ll talk when you get back.”

It was like he had no idea just how easily he could completely break her heart open in two.

She couldn’t respond to his offer, not now. She didn’t know what to say. She didn’t know what to say, because this wasn’t the sort of thing she should respond to just on the basis of therapeutic significance. She couldn’t formulate a response, just on the basis of who he was as a client and what she thought he needed. It was something else, something more, something personal. What he was asking, what he was offering, was something that deserved a personal response. It was something, perhaps, that really did deserve a selfish response.

He was right, it was the sort of offer that deserved thought. He was right, it was something she should take seriously. He was right about all that. And, even more, he deserved to be taken seriously. He deserved to know that she didn’t make her choices flippantly. He deserved to know that, when she made a decision, it was one she stood by. That it was hers, and hers alone.

She cleared her throat.

“I have a favor to ask of you,” she said, and saying it felt like cutting through a thick tension. She had come into the session, today, with a plan, and now she was even more intent on following through on it. “You can do blessings, can’t you? You’ve said so, I think.”

He nodded. He was listening. He was still looking away, but he was listening.

“Is there anything like a blessing for safe travel?”

That got a smile from him--something hesitant and small, but a smile all the same. “There is, yes. Helps with avoiding flight delays and the like, too. It’s a useful one.”

Gift-giving is a contentious and challenging topic, in the context of psychotherapy. There is often good reason to avoid accepting a gift, or an act of service in place of a gift, from a client. It can alter the dynamic between client and therapist, after all. A gift, or an act of service in place of a gift, can be an attempt for the client to win favor or affection. It can be an attempt to appease the therapist, a projective attempt to silence criticism. It can, in other words, be therapeutically
inappropriate for a therapist to accept a gift, or an act of service in place of a gift, from a client. This is why, for both ethical and practical reasons, therapists are encouraged to treat gift-giving with care. They are encouraged, unless they have good therapeutic reasons to do so, not to accept gifts, and especially not to ask for them.

Aubrey Thyme, she believed, had good therapeutic reasons to do so. She had extremely good therapeutic reasons to do so, she thought, especially in light of the offer he had just made.

“In that case,” she said, “if it’s not too big an ask, would you give me a blessing for safe travels?”

That too-small smile was still there. He let out an equally small laugh. He looked back at her. “You never said you were going anywhere.”

“So then it’ll be one more useless blessing on top of all the others.” She made herself give a nonchalant shrug. She made herself give a grin, and it felt good to do so. It was a grin that cut through how heavy and tired she felt, at least a bit, and she suspected it may have cut through how heavy and tired he felt, as well.

He didn’t shift in his seat. He didn’t move, except to raise a hand. He raised the hand that wasn’t holding Dave’s business card, and he made a waving motion in the air between them. It was quick, and it felt like nothing. It felt like it would, if any other client raised a hand and waved it in front of her. But she trusted him. She trusted, he would not lie about something like this.

“Done,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said, and she meant it.

“You’ll have safe travels,” he said, but maybe it was more something he did than said.

“You’ll check in once a week,” she said, and she would make it something she did if she could.

“Once a week,” he agreed.

“And then, I’ll be back in a month,” she said. “I’ll be back in a month, and we’ll see each other then.”

“Sure,” he said, like he didn’t have it in him to fully believe it. He could break her heart open in two.

It was time for the session to come to an end.

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A month can be a very long time. A lot can happen, in a month.

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[Client AJC]: You said one text a week, but you didn’t specify whether gifs count as texts. Shall I assume you like the Minions? This is why precision matters, Herb.

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[Client AJC]: I woke up to send this. Happy?

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[Client AJC]: You didn’t warn me about Dave. I’m holding this against you.

[Client AJC]: Before you even ask, I kept my promise. I was nice. I was very nice. No one could say I wasn’t nice.

[Client AJC]: It wasn’t my fault.

[Client AJC]: You said one text a week, but you didn’t specify only one. Precision, Herb. Precision.

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[Client AJC]: See you next week.

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[David Hampson]: welcome back!!! hope u had a great trip did u get a magnet? i saw 2 of ur clients i’ll fill u in on both but we really should do a full debrief on 1 of them

[Aubrey Thyme, MS, LMHC]: I know which one you mean. Sorry about that. Hope you’re okay? I’ll be back to work Monday, but I can meet earlier if you need to talk sooner. Thanks for everything.

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She opened the door to her office, she smiled at that cantankerous son of a bitch who must be allergic to sitting, and she invited him in.

“Welcome back,” he said as he entered. She was holding the door open for him. As he passed by, she noticed him sniff. He sniffed like he had smelled something, like it had caught him off guard, like he had taken in a whiff to identify it before catching himself. She noted that, and then she closed the door behind him.

“What happened to you?” he asked, sitting down.

“It’s called a tan,” she said, adding a silent missed you too, you asshole, to the end. She took her seat.

Aubrey Thyme knew she looked different in small but subtle ways. She really did have a tan. She had gotten a haircut. She felt free. She assumed that these three things together added up to a healthier appearance. Several clients had commented on it. Several clients, themselves, had looked different, as well.

Crowley, for his part, was one of the ones who looked different after a month. He looked even more tired, sluggish. She suspected, if he took his sunglasses off, she would see dark circles under her eyes. She wondered if demons got dark circles under their eyes.

“You know,” she said, addressing the issue that had caused her a fair bit of nuisance over the past few days, “I have to wonder if maybe you don’t know what the word ‘nice’ means.”

He didn’t look amused. He didn’t look guilty, either. He didn’t look guilty, she knew, because guilt was a very painful emotion for him. He had strong defenses against guilt, she understood, because feeling guilt is the sort of thing that can start as a drop and become a torrent.

“It wasn’t my fault,” he said.

She raised up a hand to establish a truce. She might address the matter of Dave with him some later
day, but she didn’t want to push him on it now. They had other business, she knew, to attend to today. “It’s okay,” she said. “No harm done.”

Crowley looked chagrined. He looked like he had something to say, because they both knew they had other business, but he also looked like he wanted any reason to put off saying it.

“Look,” he said, and he seemed uncomfortable. “I didn’t ask where you went, and I didn’t try to find out. But you can’t just visit the Denver International Airport without expecting the smell to stick to you for a while.”

*Ah*, she thought. *That explains that.* Although, it didn’t, not really.

“You’re right,” she said, and she offered a smile. “I flew into Denver. I was in Colorado.”

He looked at her, and he looked like he was surprised she gave him even that much. He hadn’t been expecting it. But that was okay. Aubrey Thyme was a professional, and she felt free, and she felt competent for the first time in a long while.

Psychotherapy, of the sort that Aubrey Thyme practiced, is often referred to as *talk therapy.* This is because it primarily uses talking as a tool. A central assumption to the sort of therapy that Aubrey Thyme practiced is that words have healing power, that putting thoughts and feelings into words can provide insight and growth, that we have the power to fix one another through conversation. It is a mistake, however, to assume that talking is the only tool available to a psychotherapist like Aubrey Thyme. Language is a powerful tool, but there are others, as well. It would be a mistake for a professional therapist to forget that there are other tools that can help a client heal.

There are, in Colorado, a variety of Buddhist centers that offer silent retreats. These centers are run by monks rather than psychotherapists, but they are still intended to offer healing, of a sort. The tools used, in these centers, are silence and sitting still, with the goal of training one’s mind to accept the flow of experience without rage or expectation. Visiting one of these Buddhist centers can provide a valuable lesson in how much can be done with tools other than words.

Aubrey Thyme was not a Buddhist. She learned, through a month’s length of time, that she didn’t have it in her to be a Buddhist. There were certain elements to the Buddhist worldview that she found amenable—the whole “life is suffering” claim seemed fairly on point—but the general lifestyle, especially the expectation that one could feel at peace while sitting silent and still, just didn’t fit her. All the same, silent retreats, like the ones offered by Buddhist centers in Colorado, can have a potent meliorative effect. Silence, sometimes, is precisely what you need, even if it’s painful. Perhaps, especially, if it’s painful.

“Did you like it?” he asked, and the corners of his lips curled up just enough for her to guess that this was something he cared about, but also, that he didn’t want to let on that he did. “The airport, I mean.”

She didn’t have an opinion of the Denver International Airport. She let the question drop with a shrug of her shoulders and a smile.

“I saw two demons,” she said.

“In my airport?” he snapped immediately to attention, the sluggishness evaporated.

“What?” It took her a second to catch up. She shook her head, and she gestured for him to calm down. “No, no. This was O’Hare, actually. I had a layover.”

“Oh,” he said. He started to calm. He relaxed his muscles, his hands. He sat back, allowed himself
to get more comfortable. He gave a sigh. “That makes sense, then. Who were they?”

“No idea.”

“What did they look like?”

“People. I mean, humans. I could tell what they were, though.”

“You spot any identification?”

“Huh?”

He turned his head to the side, displaying his tattoo that wasn’t actually a tattoo.

“Oh,” she said. “No, I didn’t spot anything like that.”

“Well, not much I can do, if I don’t know who it was.” The sluggishness was returning. The burst of energy had taken a lot out of him. A month away, excepting one unfruitful interaction with Dave, had taken a lot out of him. “Did they bother you at all?”

“Not at all.” She smiled, got a bit more comfortable in her seat, matching him. “They were paying attention to me, though. They watched me for a while. I think they were scared.”

“For good reason,” he said.

“I made a face at them, and they ran away.”

He snorted. “You made a face?”

What she had done was bare her teeth and hiss as audibly as she could manage. She wasn’t going to tell him that, though.

“And they ran away,” she confirmed.

He was sluggish, but she could tell it wasn’t keeping him from growing agitated. He was growing agitated, she knew, because she was back from her month away, and they both knew what that meant. He was growing agitated because, sooner or later, he was going to run out of ways to stall.

She was ready for him to run out of ways to stall. She was prepared. She had had a whole month, after all.

“You wouldn’t have to worry, you know,” he said, and his voice was deeper than it had been moments before. “If you take up my offer, you don’t have to worry.”

She smiled. She smiled at him. She gave him her smile, free and satisfied. He had broached the subject, which was why she smiled. He had done it obliquely--he hadn’t said the words, not exactly--but that was okay. It was okay, Aubrey Thyme knew, because she had just spent a month learning about all the tools other than talking that can have therapeutic value.

“I brought you something,” she said, and she still felt like smiling.

Gift-giving is a contentious and challenging topic, in the context of psychotherapy. It is a complicated matter, determining whether to accept a gift from a client. It is a different and yet equally complicated matter, determining whether to give a gift to a client. A professional therapist, like Aubrey Thyme, knew that significance could linger on any item she happened to give to a client. She knew that, in her capacity as therapist, she had the power to turn objects into symbols, to
give them meaning, to make them something more than ordinary. This was a power, she knew, that deserved respect and careful use. Gift-giving was something she avoided, unless she felt confident in its therapeutic value.

And now, given her circumstances, given the month she had spent away, given the month she had spent thinking about how Crowley had made his offer while tapping Dave’s card against his armrest, she was confident of its therapeutic value.

“You did?” He said. He sounded wary.

“I did,” she confirmed, and it felt good to have a plan, to know what she was doing, to be competent. She grinned. “But before I get it out, let me be very clear. This is most definitely, one hundred percent symbolic.”

He looked at her like she’d just made a threat. He was wary, but she also knew his curiosity would get the best of him. It always did. “Okay,” he said, cautious.

There was a bag, on the floor, down by the foot of her chair. She had placed it there, that morning. She had brought it from Colorado. She picked it up, now, and put it in her lap. She didn’t open it, not yet.

“I promise you,” she said, and she was still smiling, and she was really leaning into it, because this was the sort of thing that could only work if she was willing to go whole-hog. “I didn’t know the place had an orchard before I went there.”

She watched, as the inference worked its way through his brain. He looked like he wanted to grin, but also like he was afraid to. She hadn’t responded to his offer, not yet. He looked like he wanted to grin, like he wanted to believe she wasn’t about to kick him out, but she hadn’t said the words yet. She hadn’t said if she wanted to accept his offer, she hadn’t said whether it was finally time for him to accept another rejection.

She hadn’t said the words and, she had decided, she wasn’t going to. Actions can be words.

“You’re ridiculous,” he said.

“No, it’s symbolism,” she said, although she knew both could be true. She was okay with it. She still hadn’t opened the bag. “Let me guess, every single time you let a human know who you really are, they end up offering you an apple at some point, don’t they?”

With that, she got him: he laughed. He was sluggish, and he was wary, but she had gotten him to laugh. That was good.

“Let me be clear,” she went on, now opening the bag, now pulling out what she had inside. “I’m not offering you an apple. What I’m doing is offering to share an apple with you.”

She held it up, between them. It was a shiny, gorgeously green Granny Smith. It was a Granny Smith apple that had been grown and tended to by Buddhist monks. She held it up, as the gift she had brought to share with him.

“There’s plenty of things the sharing of a meal can symbolize,” he said. She had gotten him amused, and that was good, but he was also still tired, and he was feeling something deeper, too, she was sure of it.

“Well, this time…” she said, as she pulled a small pairing knife out of the bag. She had come prepared, after all. She had worked for a month to sit still, to find her answers, to learn how to be
free, to remember what it meant to be competent. “I want this to symbolize something very specific.”

She cut two thick slices out of the apple: one for him, one for her. He watched, as she did this. He had often looked, to her, like a child who had been slapped for asking for his needs to be met. A meal, even one no larger than a single apple slice, was the sort of thing that could meet a need. Even for someone who didn’t technically need to eat.

She held the slice for him up, but she did not yet hold it out so that he could take it. “I’m using this to symbolize that my answer hasn’t changed.”

He was watching her. He waited. There are many tools that have therapeutic value, and words are just one of them.

“I’m telling you, my answer hasn’t changed,” she repeated, because it mattered, because he was her client, and because she spent a month coming to accept that this was true. “I’d have eaten the apple, if I’d been offered it. And I’d have offered it, if I had been there to do so. I would have.”

Now she held out the slice for him. It took time for him to feel safe enough to take it, and she waited for him to do so. She waited, because that was what he needed. She waited, and then he took the slice, and he grinned at her like he couldn’t believe she could be as ridiculous as this, like he couldn’t believe she’d walked him into something as stupid as accepting a piece of an apple from a human. She felt like she could be nourished by that grin.

She brought her slice of apple to her lips. She ate it, and she watched as he ate his. She watched, as he chewed before he swallowed, and she wondered if he actually had to do that. She wondered if that had been a choice he made, to chew the apple slice like a human would, and, if so, what it had symbolized for him. She wondered, and she knew she wouldn’t learn the answer.

They were joined together, through this act, through the symbolism of it. This was the power of objects, of gifts, of acts, in the heady, special space that is a therapist’s office: it was the power to make meaning, to choose one’s symbols, to interact purposefully and intentionally with another through those symbols.

Aubrey Thyme had chosen to share with her client, Anthony J. Crowley, an apple that had been grown and tended to by Buddhist monks, by humans who had dedicated their lives to the belief that life was suffering, who accepted that life was suffering, who believed in an existence filled with wheels upon wheels of suffering. She shared this apple with him, because it was meaningful for them, together, to do so. She shared it with him because, she knew, it would be meaningful for him, as her client, to do so. And she shared it with him because, as she had come to understand through a full month in silence with Buddhist monks, it would be meaningful for her to do so, too. He didn’t have to know precisely what the whole of this act symbolized for her, just as she didn’t have to know if it had been symbolic, for him, to chew as he ate.

Aubrey Thyme was a God-damned professional psychotherapist who could share an apple with none other than the serpent of Eden. She shared with him this apple, because it symbolized that this was what she chose to be. And this was exactly what she would choose to be, again and again, over and over, if that were the sort of thing a human was allowed to do.

“It’s good to be back,” she said, once she was finished with her apple slice. She felt free, she felt competent, she felt prepared. “Ready to get to work?”

“Sure,” he said. And he could smile.
Chapter Summary

Aubrey Thyme learns about what it means to be a gardener.

She invited him into her office, like she always did, but he didn’t go sprawl out in his chair, like he always did. Instead, he walked into her office and then stopped. He stopped, and he looked towards the window, and he let out what was obviously an annoyed sigh.

“I wasn’t going to say anything, but this has gone too far,” he said. He said it with a tone that made Aubrey Thyme think, geez, what did I do, as she closed the door.

Crowley stalked over to the window. He stalked over to the tree. He peered at the tree, and he reached out to pluck out a leaf. Then he peered at her, and he held the leaf up at her eye level.

The leaf was brown. He peered at her, holding up the brown leaf up for her to see.

“This is a dead leaf,” he said. He said it like it was an accusation.

“Okay,” she said. Trees, in Aubrey Thyme’s limited experience, got brown leaves sometimes. It just happened. It was a seasonal thing, maybe.

She was still standing by the door. She didn’t intend to sit down until he sat down.

“This shouldn’t be happening,” he said. He crumbled up the dried out leaf, tossing it into the tree’s pot, and then he leaned over to peer more closely at it. He poked at the soil, and then he turned his glare back at her. She wanted him to stop acting like a disappointed schoolmarm and sit down already, but he clearly had other plans.

“Didn’t Dave water it at all while you were gone?” he asked.

“What?”

“It wouldn’t be getting brown leaves, if he’d taken proper care of it.”

*For fuck’s sake,* she thought. “Crowley, Dave wasn’t responsible for my tree while I was gone. Dave has not and never will be responsible for watering my tree.”

That sounded disturbingly close to a euphemism, and it made her wince. He didn’t seem to notice, at least. His attention was back on the tree.

“So who was supposed to be caring for it, then? Because, I can tell you, they let both of you down.”

It was at this moment that it occurred to Aubrey Thyme that perhaps she should have asked someone to take care of her tree while she was gone. *Oops,* she thought. Apparently, Crowley could tell, because he tsked out his disapprobation.

“Trees die if you don’t water them, Herb.”
“Good to know.” She didn’t care. She motioned over to his seat. “Let’s get to work.”

“No,” he said, the bossy schoolmarm that he was. “I’m not putting up with this any longer.”

He turned away, which gave her a good opportunity to roll her eyes. She watched as he looked around the room for a moment before he reached down near the base of the tree’s pot. When he came back up, he was holding a watering can. She most certainly did not own a watering can, let alone keep one there.

“I’ll be right back,” he said, moving past her, going to open the door.

“Wait, where are you going?” she asked.

He paused just long enough to give her a look. It was a look that meant, that’s the stupidest question I’ve ever heard. “To fill this up,” he said, with a shake of the watering can.

“Why didn’t you just--” she started, but he was already out the door. So, instead, she rolled her eyes again, gave up, and moved over to her chair. She slouched down in it. She slouched, because she wasn’t going to waste her professional posture on an empty room.

He came back, and she watched as the door closed behind him. He went over to the tree with the watering can. She watched as he crouched down, so he was closer to the soil’s level.

“How chlorinated is your water here?” he asked.

“No idea.”

“Lead content?”

“Who knows.”

He looked up from the tree to give her a glare. “Not helping, Herb.”

She knew. She stayed slouched. She was bored, and she was satisfied for him to know it.

“What kind of soil are you using here?”

“There are different kinds of soil?”

He gave an annoyed groan. He was inspecting the dirt, and she couldn’t be bothered to wonder what sort of information he could get by rubbing dirt through his fingers.

“Don’t worry,” he said, although there was something different about his tone, now. “We both know this isn’t your fault.”

“What?” she asked, but he wasn’t listening.

“You’re a real trooper, I know. A real trooper.” He was still fussing with the tree, pulling off another leaf or two. “You’re putting your all into just staying alive, and I get that. Good show, good work.”

What, she repeated, to herself. She wasn’t bored anymore.

“In fact, I’ve got some anthuriums at home who could learn a lesson from you about what it means to persevere.”
What, she thought for a third time. She pulled herself out of her slouch.

“Now, after you’re sorted out, maybe then you and I will have a chat about what you should be able to accomplish. But we both know, don’t we? We both know you’re not the one responsible for this mess.”

Aubrey Thyme couldn’t keep her mouth from hanging open. She couldn’t keep from staring at her goddamn motherfucking client, who was currently crouching over by her tree, doing who-knows-what to its soil and leaves and branches, and who was very clearly not talking to her.

“Crowley…” She started, then she found she had to start again. “Crowley, are you talking to my tree?”

He stopped what he was doing, and he looked over at her. “It’s an old gardening trick,” he said, like it was obvious.

“You talk to plants,” she sounded it out.

“Well, I talk to you, don’t I?” he said, like the insouciant ass he was.

“You talk to plants,” she said again.

“It’s a gardening trick,” he said again.

“Do they… Do they talk back?”

She had no idea what she would do, if the answer he gave was yes.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said, because she apparently was the one being ridiculous. He stood up, brushing off his hands, and giving one final look at the tree. “It’s a way to keep them in line, make sure they understand what’s expected of them.”

“Hold on, hold on…” Aubrey Thyme squeezed shut her eyes and allowed herself a moment to think.

Aubrey Thyme was a professional with over ten years of experience working with severe cases of trauma. She had had clients threaten her, scream obscenities in her face, proposition her for sex, and even worse. She had even gone through the experience of learning that one of her clients was a literal demon, and she had managed to come out the other side of that experience feeling free and competent, her therapeutic alliance with that demon somehow intact. And yet, even with more than ten years of experience, there are still ways in which a professional like Aubrey Thyme could be surprised.

For instance, she could learn that her client, who was a literal fucking demon, made it a habit to talk to his fucking plants, and she somehow hadn’t picked up on that for all of their time working together.

“Okay,” she said, trying to orient herself, trying to think this through. “Let’s talk about this. I want to know how to manage a garden. Explain it to me. What do you mean, you keep them in line?”

Her interest made him turn sheepish, but she managed to coax it out of him. She managed to get him to explain, and she paid far closer attention to this explanation than she ever had to anything he had said about his garden in the past. She got him to describe the process he went through, the way he reacted when one of his plants didn’t live up to his expectations, as he described it. She got him to walk her through what it had been like, the most recent time he had made an example out of an
under-performer. It took the whole session, but she got it all out of him. She got it all out of him, and somehow, somehow, she managed to make it through the whole session without her face giving too much away.

Because it was perfect. It was absolutely perfect. It was the most obvious, the most clear-cut, the most painfully on-the-nose perfect fucking thing she had ever heard of. It was the sort of thing that could make someone believe in miracles—not Aubrey Thyme personally, no, but maybe someone. It was the sort of thing that could make someone craft calves out of gold and start worshiping nonexistent gods of psychotherapy, just to have someone to be able to praise for it. It was just that perfect.

Aubrey Thyme knew a good metaphor, when she saw one. She knew a bad metaphor when she saw one, too. And, without doubt, she knew a slap-across-the-face, so-obvious-how-could-you-miss it metaphor, when it was, in fact, slapped across her face.

_I can use this_, she thought.

She wasn’t sure how, not just yet. And she most certainly wasn’t sure when—certainly, not just yet. But it fit like an ace up the sleeve, and it felt like the semblance of a plan, like the promise that she would be able to work out a good plan. She liked how that felt.

Not yet. Certainly not yet. But, sometime. She could wait. She could keep this, this ace up the sleeve.

She and Crowley, they had a lot of work to do.

***

“It was… bad.”

“Oh, that’s something.” It wasn’t something. It wasn’t anything. They had spent several sessions now, trying to pull any description of the fire other than _bad_ from him, and they had failed. But he was trying, and this was hard, and she would support him. “Check in. Distress level. Where are you?”

“Twenty,” he said.

Twenty wasn’t great, but it wasn’t bad. Twenty was better than last week, at least. Twenty meant, they could go on.

“As you were driving up, what did you hear?”

“Sirens.”

“Describe them.”

“Loud.”

“Check in?”

“Thirty.”

“You heard sirens, and they were loud.” She paused so they could take some deep breaths. “What happened next?”

“I parked.”
“What did you see?”

“What did you see?”

“Sixty. That’s a sixty.”

Trauma processing is, in many ways, a form of exposure therapy. The client is exposed to the memories of the traumatic event over and over again, without allowing the memories to overwhelm them, until they can reliably access those memories without distress. The more the client can express what happened, clearly and thoroughly, without feeling distressed from the memories, the less hold the traumatic experience has on the client’s brain. It is, in this way, a form of neurological training: the client’s brain slowly trains itself how to respond non-traumatically to that which had been so overwhelming.

To assist in this process, therapists like Aubrey Thyme will sometimes make reference to SUDs, or Subjective Units of Distress. The client is asked to provide a SUDs rating while describing the traumatic series of events, and the memory processing is put on hold if the rating spikes. Generally, Aubrey Thyme liked to use a SUDs scale from 1 - 100, and she had clients stop at any rating above 50. She did not, however, appreciate the acronym, suds, and so she did not use that term with clients. Aubrey Thyme had standards.

Crowley had spiked, and so they stopped. They stopped, just as they had previously. They stopped, exactly as they had every single time Crowley got anywhere close to describing smoke, or flames, or even heat, in reference to the bookshop fire. At least, this time, he had stopped at a SUDs rating of 60. Last week, it had been 85.

He could discuss other fires without distress. He had described to her, in great detail, what it was like to drive his car straight through a wall of fire. He could also describe what it had been like to watch his car explode in flames. And describe it he had, multiple times, at length, in a level of detail that was completely lost on her. They had spoken about other fires, as well. They had even spent some time with him flicking his index finger on and off, like a lighter, without reaching a SUDs rating of even 1.

The bookshop fire, however, was different.

“Okay, so what do we do?” she prompted. He knew what to do. They took slow breaths. He stretched out his fingers, then his hands, then his arms, and so on. He slowly looked around the room and counted what he could see. He calmed himself.

“Let me know when you’re ready to try again,” she said. Her voice was soft. He was working very, very hard.

“Okay,” he said, after a minute and a half.

She observed him, and she formed the judgment that he was, in fact, ready to try again. Okay, she nodded.

“I was driving to the bookshop, and I was trying to ring up Aziraphale.”

“Check in.”

“Twenty.”

“Okay.”

“Aziraphale wasn’t answering.”
“How did that feel?”

“It was terrifying.”

*Thank the Lord*, she thought, because that was something new. And then she thought, *Oh, I’m not thinking that again.* And then she returned her attention to her client.

“You were driving to the bookshop, and it was terrifying that Aziraphale wasn’t answering his phone. Distress level?”

“Twenty-five.”

“As you were driving up, what did you hear?”

“Sirens.”

She paused, took noticeably deep breaths. He followed her example.

“Distress level.”

“Thirty.”

Another pause.

“Describe the sirens.”

“Loud. Still at thirty.”

She smiled. “Okay. You heard sirens, and they were loud. What happened next?”

“I parked.”

Deep breaths.

“What did you see?”

He was so very close to saying it, to saying *I saw the smoke*. She saw his mouth open, she saw the words almost, *almost* form for him. Then she watched those words get stuck, turn poisonous, work their way through his body like pain. He let out a guttural yowl, rather than words, and he catapulted himself out of his chair so he could pace back at forth.

“I can’t do this,” he growled, soon as he was calm enough to speak again.

“It’s not easy,” she said.

“Not getting anywhere.”

“Now, hold on,” she said, carefully. “I keep track of every distress rating you give me. Did you know that? I chart them out. They’re going down.”

“You chart them?” He stopped pacing to look at her.

“It’s how I know they’re going down.”

“They are?”

“Slowly, yes, but they are.”
“Is this how long it usually takes?”

_Not at all_, she thought. “There’s no point to making comparisons,” she said.

He sighed loudly. She watched as he paced his way over to the edge of the room and leaned his forehead against the wall. She watched as the anxiety coursing through his body turned itself into exhaustion. She watched, as he sagged.

“I don’t think I can try it again today,” he said. He said it like it was defeat, like he was disappointed with his own frailty. She understood, however, that it was something else entirely.

“I’m really glad you could recognize that and express it,” she said, and she meant it.

What Crowley had just said indicated a substantial up-tick in his capacities for self-insight and self-care. He may have had to go overboard in the drama department in order to do it, pushing himself theatrically against the wall across the room, but it was still an accomplishment. She was proud for him.

“This shouldn’t be so hard,” he muttered to the wall.

“Look,” she said, and she repositioned herself in her seat. “Why don’t you come sit back down, and we can talk about that.”

Crowley turned his head, without removing it from the wall, so that he could look at her. He wasn’t wearing his sunglasses right now, so she could see in his eyes how he was deliberating. Deliberation was slow work for him, today. He didn’t say anything, but he did finally push himself away from the wall, meander back to his chair, and collapse into it.

“Ohay,” she said, to get started. “Do you feel up to talking about the book, more generally?”

He gave a gesture, a gesture that meant _may as well_. So, she would press on.

When working with trauma survivors, particularly those who have survived multiple traumas, there is a risk that one will fall into the trap of thinking of each of those traumas as separate and distinct concerns which can, thereby, be addressed separately and distinctly. It is easy to _compartmentalize_ them, to conceptualize them separately, to ignore the true nature of trauma. Trauma sits in the brain like an ever-present actuality, and one’s separate traumatic experiences all want to sit in the brain in the exact same way, in the exact same spot. They are not willing to neatly separate themselves, demarcate the brain’s energies into _yours_ and _mine_. Instead, they crowd each other, they rub against each other, they stack up, one atop another, and compress down into each other. Traumas get layered up on top of other traumas, the brain neurologically unequipped to differentiate between them.

This is the particular challenge, when it comes to working with clients who have experienced early-life traumas. Early-life traumas take up residence in the brain while the brain is still forming, while the personality is growing, while the whole of the person is still learning how to make sense of the world. It is possible for a person’s entire self to be shaped by an early-life trauma. It is possible for that early-life trauma to have control over every other experience, every other memory, every single thought and feeling. Future traumas are thus shaped and warped by that early-life trauma. And it will be all the most problematic, when the future trauma already has a shape, a design, a structure that fits snugly into the contours of that early-life experience.

Trauma comes in layers. It comes in layers of inexpressible horror and despair, and those layers compress into one another, so that more recent layers are made in the image of the older ones.
Trauma comes in layers. It comes in layers, and trauma therapy can only succeed if those layers are acknowledged.

That was what she wanted to talk about. That was why, it felt good to have that ace up her sleeve.

She held up the table of contents in one hand, so that he could see it. “Here’s what I’ve been thinking about,” she said.

With her other hand, she used a pencil to point at the chapter title, *The Bandstand*. “This is when things started getting really bad, isn’t it? You and Aziraphale had a fight, and it ended with you feeling rejected by someone who meant more to you than anything else.”

She had been very careful about how she worded that claim. She had been very careful not to say, *you were rejected by someone you loved*. She watched him carefully, to see if even that wording was too challenging for him. But he was listening, and he just looked tired. So, she pressed on.

The pencil moved, now tapping against the chapter title, *A Big Mess*. “Then, what happened next? You found out that all the people you used to work with were now mortal enemies, and they wanted to kill you.”

She watched him. His expression didn’t change. So, she pressed on.

The pencil moved, now, to *The Fire*. “And then, you found yourself completely surrounded by flames.”

His expression didn’t change. He looked tired. She watched him, and she gave him time to think, even though he didn’t look like he was thinking.

“Does that remind you of anything?” she prompted, and she made sure her voice was soothing and kind.

She waited. His expression didn’t change.

She waited.

His expression still didn’t change, but the look of his eyes did. He had been paying attention to her, but now he wasn’t. There was a shift in his focus, a shift in his attention. He was distant, now.

“I don’t want to have to talk about that,” he said, and he sounded so tired, and he sounded so scared and small.

It was a surprise, this honesty. She hadn’t expected it. She had expected, instead, for him to change the subject, for him to try to distract her. She had expected him to be petulant and overdramatic. She had expected to have to present it like a favor to her, him being willing to talk about the fall. But, he hadn’t done that. She would wonder about that, later. For now, she would give him her full attention.

“I think we’re going to have to,” she said. It was poor consolation, she knew. She situated the table of contents back with the rest of the book materials, and she placed them all on her end table. It was a signal: he had her full attention.

“I don’t like thinking about it,” he said.

“But I bet you find yourself thinking about it anyway.”
He let out a heavy breath, by way of response. He looked at her. He looked at her, his eyes so sad and tired. She would save him, if she had the chance.

“What do you want to know.” It should have been a question, but he didn’t have the energy for it. He didn’t have the energy for it to be anything but a statement.

She wouldn’t push him too far. She wouldn’t. She didn’t want to push him at all. But she knew her job. She knew her professional responsibilities. She knew, if she waited to push him on this subject until he was less tired, he would never get less tired.

“Whatever comes to mind,” she said.

She watched his eyes, his sad and scared eyes. She saw how they widened, the way they did when they were teary and he was desperate to keep the tears from forming. She watched as his eyes darted about--upward, to the side, to her quickly, and then down to the floor.

“It hurt,” he said.

She listened.

“It hurt a lot,” he said, and then he took a deep, sharp inhalation of breath. It wasn’t the kind of deep inhalation that could help him grow calm, but something else. It was the kind of inhalation that could help him bottle himself up. It was the kind of inhalation that he used to try to keep a sob at bay.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

She watched his eyes, his tearful and pained eyes. She watched as they moved around the room, again. She watched as they blinked rapidly, in a way that wasn’t natural for him, which she knew meant he was trying not to cry. She watched, as he took another sharp inhalation of breath, and she watched him keep that breath deep inside for too long. He kept that breath inside, and he used it. He used that breath, stored it up in his lungs, used it to push away the tears, to push away how sad and scared and small he felt, to push away the pain that was too terrible to let overtake him. She watched, as he pushed it all away, pushed it back, pushed it back into the deep dark place where he must have kept it, always.

She watched, as he compartmentalized.

She watched, as he dissociated from everything he couldn’t safely feel.

“Of course,” he said after a moment, and his voice was back to normal, and his energy level was back to normal, and he was back to the cantankerous trickster he imagined himself into being. “I really do think it was all part of Her plan.”

“You’ve said that before,” she said. She wouldn’t call out his compartmentalization. She wouldn’t call out his use of his defenses, his resistance. Not right now. It was her job to push him, not destroy him.

“You’re welcome, by the way,” he said, like a tease, like a taunt, like he was nothing more than a petulant, childish ass. He put on a shit-eating grin, or at least he tried to. “Might be nice to hear even a single human express some gratitude for the world still being here, you know.”

She didn’t take his bait. She wouldn’t. She continued to sit, quiet and compassionate. She continued to sit with the weight of everything he felt, even if he couldn’t meet her there.
“It was Her plan for you to fall,” she tried, she summarized, quiet and compassionate.

“Doesn’t matter,” he said, he shrugged, he denied and dismissed.

*Once more, she thought. Only once more.*

“She made you, so you would fall.”

And there it was: there was the anger. Anthony J. Crowley had always been angry and there it was, again, in his eyes. It was just a flash, a quick flash, a brutal and ripping flash of anger in his eyes, directed right at her. She could take it. She could take that anger, she could let him direct it at her. She could take it, until he found a better direction for it.

“You need to be careful, Aubrey Thyme,” he said, over-enunciating, the way he spoke when he was trying to keep himself from hissing.

“We’re going to have to talk about this,” she said. It wasn’t a push, it wasn’t a prod. It was just true.

“No.” He shook his head, but he kept his eyes pinned on her. “No, you do not say things like that.”

Aubrey Thyme had never liked it when he tried to tell her what she could or could not say. Aubrey Thyme didn’t like anyone trying to tell her what she could or could not say. She tried to ignore it, but it was still there, that twinge of annoyance. She thought, he should know better about the work they did, about her.

“We don’t censor ourselves in here,” she said. It was a lie, of course: *she* censored what she said all the time, based on what was therapeutically appropriate for her client. But he wasn’t supposed to censor himself, and he wasn’t supposed to censor her. She had thought, he should know her better than that.

“Aubrey,” he said. He said it, and he shifted in his seat so he could lean forward. He said it, and he made his face harden in a certain way, a way she recognized, a way that meant, *I mean business.* He said it, but his jaw barely moved as he sounded out the words. “When a demon tells you there are things you should not say, you need to lissssstten.”

She let those words hang in the air between them.

Aubrey Thyme had spent a month in silence, living with Buddhist monks. She had spent a month in silence, living with humans who believed that life was suffering, that life was nothing but suffering, that existence was nothing but wheels upon wheels of suffering. Aubrey Thyme had spent a month in silence, living with Buddhist monks, and she had used that time to learn how to be free. She had used that time to accept that she was free, that she was competent, that she was exactly who she would choose to be, again and again, over and over, if that were the sort of thing a human was allowed to do. Aubrey Thyme had spent a month in silence, living with humans who believed in wheels upon wheels of suffering, and she had used all the tools they provided to find acceptance, to find peace and acceptance, to find freedom.

Aubrey Thyme had spent a month learning how to accept and embrace the feeling of freedom. And she wasn’t going to have her cantankerous, sad, scared demon of a client try to stifle it.

But, also, it was nearly time for the session to end.

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She didn’t raise that topic again, not in the next session. Not in the session after that, either. She had needed time to watch him, to check in with him, to reinforce his methods of self-care. She had needed time to plan. She had waited, until she felt satisfied with her plan.

“How about today,” she said, after they had both sat down, “we talk about the tree.”

He looked at her, surprised, shifting immediately into giving her the look, doing the thing.

“No, not like that,” she clarified, annoyed. “I mean, literally. The tree.”

“Oh.” He dropped the thing, and he looked over to the tree. He looked dissatisfied with what he saw, and for good reason. “You know, it’s not actually that hard to keep a tree alive, Herb. Plenty of humans much stupider than you somehow manage to do it just fine.”

She shrugged. She wasn’t going to let him lead this discussion.

“I’ve just been wondering,” she said, casual and cool. She was palming that ace out from her sleeve. “You’ve always been so nice to this tree. Why do you think that is?”

“What do you mean?” he asked. His brow furrowed.

“Well, you’ve told me about, you know, proper garden management…” It had taken her some time to come up with that phrase. “You’re not nice to your own plants. So, what makes this tree different?”

He thought about it. He shrugged. He hadn’t seen right through her, not yet. “My garden is well-tended, Herb. My garden has no excuses. Your tree isn’t the one responsible for its state, now, is it?”

There was something strange, hearing him call her ‘Herb’ so close to a discussion about his garden. She filed that thought away, for later. She would wonder about the significance of that, later. For now, she had a plan to follow.

“Right,” she said. She nodded. “You can’t blame the tree for how it is, can you?”

He didn’t understand, yet, what she was trying to do. But, she could see, he was growing cautious. He could recognize a leading question, when he heard one.

“Suppose not,” he allowed.

“So who should we blame?”

He could recognize a trap, when he was being led to it.

“What are you trying to do, Herb?” he asked, or rather warned.

“We’re just talking about the tree.” She shrugged, feigning innocence, feigning nonchalance, wanting him to see right through her. “We can talk about the tree, can’t we?”

“No,” he said, with a heavy certainty, “No, we can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Aubrey…” He laughed, but it wasn’t actually a laugh. He shook his head. He raised a hand, and she thought he was going to remove his sunglasses, but he didn’t. Instead, he just pushed them more securely onto his nose. “You’re not the only one who can understand an allegory.”
“Good,” she said, and she meant it. “So, we’re on the same page. Tell me who’s at fault for the fact that the tree is suffering.”

“Aubrey,” he said again, and there was an edge to it. There was an edge to all of him, now, a certain sort of dangerous edge. “You need to listen to me.”

“I am listening.” It was true, she thought it was true. “Whatever you have to say, I’m listening.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but then he closed it again. He closed his mouth, and he let his jaw work. He let his jaw work around any number of words that he wouldn’t say, that he wouldn’t let out. He let his jaw work, as that dangerous edge to him intensified, as he grew more rigid and still.

“You’re not the only one who understands allegory,” he repeated, the words clear and brittle. “What I’m saying is, you and I are not the only ones who can understand it.”

They were talking past each other. She could tell. She was surprised by it, because she had thought they understood each other, but she could tell that they weren’t fully on the same page after all. She would shift tactics, she would try to get them to the same page.

“This is your space, Crowley,” she said. “This is where we do the work you need to do. That’s what matters--”

“Are you mental?” he snapped, he sneered in frustration. He threw his hands up, gestured around the room. “What do you think this is, some sort of pocket universe? What, you think your confidentiality agreement actually makes a difference to anything? You’re not safe here, Herb.”

They weren’t on the same page. She hadn’t realized just how much they weren’t on the same page. She had brought an apple to share with him, an apple with had been grown and tended to by Buddhist monks, by humans who accepted that existence was nothing but wheels upon wheels of suffering, and she had thought they had been on the same page, or at least near to being on the same page. She had been wrong.

“Hold on, Crowley--”

“There are things you can’t say, human.” He had never called her that, before, not like that, not with that tone. She didn’t like how it felt. She wished he wasn’t wearing his sunglasses. She wished she knew how his eyes had looked, when he called her that. “There are things you can’t say, that you can’t even think. There are questions you cannot ask.”

Bullshit, she thought. She thought, bullshit.

“Let me ta--”

“She has a whole book full of allegories, and you think you can just slip one like this right past Her?”

She was getting pissed off. She didn’t want to get pissed off. She wanted them to be on the same page. She wanted him to let her talk, to let them talk through this. Instead, he was shouting at her, he was sneering, he was letting himself slip into a petty, pointless and urgent anxiety. He wasn’t trying to listen, he wasn’t trying to be honest, he was trying to protect her, to keep her safe, to stop her from the compassionate truth-telling that was her greatest professional strength. He was pissing her off, and she didn’t want it, and she just wanted him to shut the hell up for a minute, just a minute, and listen to her.

She glared at him. She glared at him, in silence, and she thought perhaps it was a glare that got
across exactly what she was feeling.

He must have seen her glare, and he must have understood it, at least a little bit. He must have, because he shifted in his seat. He pulled at the fabric of his armrests, he looked off to his side, and his jaw worked the way it did when there were things he didn’t think he could say.

She just wanted him to accept it, to believe it, to know it: there was nothing he couldn’t say.

“She loves you,” he said, and he sounded bitter. He wasn’t looking at her. He was looking off to the side. “She loves you, human, more than anything else, anything else She ever made. She lets you make mistakes, you know that? You get to make however many mistakes you want, and then She’ll forgive you. You ask for Her forgiveness, and She gives it. To you.”

He was bitter. He was angry. He wouldn’t look at her. And, she could recognize, what he was saying didn’t make sense. She recognized, what he was saying didn’t fit with what he had just said. If She would forgive anything a human did, then that meant Aubrey Thyme could say whatever she wanted. If there were things Aubrey Thyme couldn’t say, let alone think, then that meant She wasn’t willing to forgive anything a human might do. What Crowley was saying didn’t make sense, not on the surface. The individual pieces of what he said were incoherent, which, she knew, meant that there must be some other layer, some deeper layer, where they did make sense.

This had never been about the tree. Aubrey Thyme realized now, she hadn’t even needed the tree. She hadn’t needed an ace up her sleeve. She had had one the whole time. He called her Herb, and he was a gardener, and he had always identified with the plants in his garden. She hadn’t needed the tree, because she had been there, herself, sitting across from him, this whole time.

She had let herself get pissed off. She had let herself get pissed off, and she had gotten Crowley angry, and anger is a mask for shame, and fear, and sorrow. She hadn’t needed the tree, because she had been sitting across from him, this whole time. She was sitting across from him, and he was angry, and he was angry because of the divide between them, the difference between them. He was angry, because she could be forgiven for whatever she might do, and he would not be.

He was angry, because of that divide between them. But he was wrong. He was wrong about what the divide really was. He was wrong, because he thought the divide was about who could ask for forgiveness and who could not. But that wasn’t the divide between them, not at all.

Aubrey Thyme had spent a month in silence, living with Buddhist monks, with humans who accepted that existence was nothing but wheels upon wheels of suffering. She had accepted, they were right, or right enough. She had spent a month in silence, feeling what she needed to feel, thinking what she needed to think, and recognizing what she needed to recognize. She had spent a month in silence, living with Buddhist monks, and she had learned what it meant to be free, what it meant to choose to be free.

Aubrey Thyme had needed a month in silence, living with Buddhist monks, to come to accept what she knew was true. She hadn’t needed the Buddhist monks to teach her what was true, though. There were things that Aubrey Thyme had always known were true. There were things that she had fought and scraped, by fang and claw, to be able to know were true. There were things that she had never needed psychology textbooks to teach her, had never needed that misogynistic ass Freud to teach her, had never needed anyone to teach her, because she knew, she knew, she had fought to be able to know, she had survived to be able to know it. Aubrey had always known.

She knew: a mother who would abandon her child isn’t owed that child’s love.

She knew: love isn’t love when it comes at the edge of a sword.
She knew: if someone stronger than you threatens to push you down, you don’t win by trying to rise up.

She knew. She knew this, and she spent a month in silence, living with Buddhist monks, coming to accept this, to accept its significance, to accept what it meant for her and her soul. She spent a month in silence, living with humans who believed that life was suffering, and she accepted that they were right. She had accepted it, and she had accepted the corollary: if life was suffering, then there was no reason to expect an afterlife to be anything else, either.

She had accepted this. She had found how to feel free through it. She had fought for a month against that stifling, painful silence, in order to earn that feeling of freedom. And she had brought an apple that had been grown and tended to by those Buddhist monks, and she had shared it as a symbol with none other than the serpent of Eden, because she had thought, if anyone could understand what she understood, what she knew, what she could accept about herself, it would be him. She had thought that they were on the same page, or at least nearly on the same page, and she had been wrong.

“I think there’s been a miscommunication,” she said. She said it quiet. She said it like an apology. That’s what it was.

“There are things you just can’t say.”

No. There were things he couldn’t say. There were things, he hadn’t been allowed to say.

He didn’t sound bitter anymore. He didn’t sound angry, not anymore. He sounded tired and sad and small. He sounded like the child who had been slapped for asking for his needs to be met. He sounded like the child who had been abandoned, who had been told it was his fault, who had believed it.

It was her job, to help him un-believe it.

It is hard work, painfully hard work, to un-believe what one had come to believe about oneself as a result of early-life trauma, especially early-life trauma at the hands of a parent.

She heard him sniff, and she saw that he was crying. He was looking away from her, and he was crying. She could tell, he didn’t want to be doing this. She could tell, he didn’t want to cry. Sometimes, we have to do what we don’t want to do.

There would be words they would have to say, later, sometime later. There would be miscommunications to clear up. There would be new ground rules to establish. But talking is just one tool available to a therapist like Aubrey Thyme. Talking is just one tool, and silence is another. Silence, and the warmth of connection, and the very human gift of sitting in compassion with another, of shaping that compassion so that it feels like permission, permission for desperately needed tears to fall.

Maybe she hadn’t needed an ace up her sleeve. Maybe, all Crowley had needed was her. And, maybe, if she could learn to be more careful and clever, she could be enough.

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The next session, when he came into her office, he perched at the edge of his chair. He had a frantic air about him. It told her he had a plan, and it worried her.

“Here’s what we’re going to do,” he said, as she sat down. He reached into his jacket pocket, and he pulled out a sheet of paper. It wasn’t a folded sheet of paper. It looked completely crisp and
new, despite having come from his pocket.

He held it out for her, imploring her to take it. So, she did.

The language was legalistic. It was overly legalistic, more legalistic than her informed consent agreement. She had to hold it away from her face to concentrate on what she was reading, to make sense of it.

It was a contract.

“What the fuck,” she said.

“Deathbed conversion,” he said, like it was obvious, like it made perfect sense. “It works. Don’t know why, seems unfair, sure, but it works.”

She was still trying to read through the contract he had handed her. She was trying to read through it, even as he kept talking.

“You do whatever you want, until then. Anything you want, and we do our work in here. You sign that, and we can get back to work, and I’ll make sure I’m there when the time comes. I’ll do the conversion, myself, I can do that.”

“Crowley,” she said, or started. She was still looking at the contract, still trying to make sense of it. “You know what this is, right?”

“It’s security,” he said. He was intent on winning this. “It’s your safety. Should’ve done this a long time ago.”

“No, Crowley…” She shook her head. It was hard to pull herself away from the words on the paper. It was horrifying, in a way. “This… Crowley, this is a fucking contract for my soul.”

He groaned out his frustration, and he rolled his eyes. More accurately, he rolled his whole head, and his eyes just happened to go along with it.

“You’re trying to get me to sell my soul to Heaven,” she said, incredulous, offended, surprised. She pushed the piece of paper back out, towards him, for him to take it back.

He didn’t. He didn’t take it back.

“There’s no reason for you not to sign it,” he said.

“Yes, there is,” she said.

“You sign it, and we can get back to work.”

“I’m not going to sign this.”

“You should.”

“No,” she said, and she was tired of this, and she just wanted him to hear her. “No, I don’t think I should.”

“You sign it, and we can get back to work.” He wasn’t going to hear her. He didn’t want to hear her. He was refusing to hear her.

She realized, he wasn’t playing chicken.
She had to be careful. She had to be very, very careful. She brought her outstretched arm, holding the contract, back near her. She set the contract down on her knee. It was a signal, a symbol: she wasn’t signing it, but she still had it.

“Let’s talk about this. Okay?” she asked. He was still perched at the edge of his chair, and it made her uncomfortable. She had to be careful. “Why don’t we both settle in, and we can talk about this.”

“No,” he said, and he shook his head. He shook his head, because he would deny her. “You just don’t understand. You can’t understand. You’re--you’re puny, you’re small, you can’t understand these things. You have to trust me. Yeah? Trust me, and sign it.”

She wasn’t going to sign it. He couldn’t force her to sign it.

“Can you please just do me a favor?” she tried, she would try whatever she could. “As a favor for me, how about we go through a breathing exercise, and then we can talk about this.”

“I don’t need oxygen, you know that, right? Sign it, or we won’t do anything else today.”

He wasn’t playing chicken.

By this point in their relationship, Aubrey Thyme knew Crowley. She understood him. At least, she believed she understood him as well as a human could understand a demon. She knew how he did his work. She had experienced him, doing his work. He didn’t make demands, as part of his job. It was one of his professional competencies, she knew: he didn’t demand, he didn’t insist, and he could wait however long it might take to get what he wanted.

He wasn’t being very competent, right now. He was demanding, right now. He was insisting. He was not, not at all, willing to wait. She suspected, if he gave it his all, if he went about this professionally, he could ultimately win her over. He was good at what he did, after all. But he wasn’t going about this professionally. He wasn’t able, in the moment, to think like a professional. He was too upset, too committed, too invested in getting what he wanted to succeed at his job.

He wasn’t doing his job well, and it left her feeling like she didn’t know how to do her job, either.

“I just need you to slow down,” she said. She said it carefully, she said it slowly. She raised up a hand towards him as if to say, please, just give me this.

“This shouldn’t be a hard decision!” he shouted.

“Stop,” she said. She demanded. He wasn’t acting like himself. He was frantic, he was insistent, he was overwhelmed and taking it out on her. This was dangerous, and she was terrified that he was in danger, that he was too overwhelmed, that she had pushed him towards topics before he was ready for them, that she had pushed him towards topics she didn’t really understand, not really, and that maybe there were topics he just couldn’t ever be ready for. She was terrified for him, and she needed to help him. She needed to help him, but she wasn’t going to sell her soul--not for him, not to Her, not ever.

“I’ll leave,” he warned. He warned, and he was scared, and he looked frantic. He was frightening her.

“I really hope you won’t.”

“Please, Aubrey, I will leave.” He didn’t want to leave. He didn’t want to. He was terrified of leaving, she could tell. He was terrified, but he had set the stakes. He wasn’t playing chicken. He
had set the stakes, he had made this into what it was, and she knew it wasn’t really about her. She knew, this wasn’t really about her soul. She had thought she could get him to identify with the tree, but he had always, already, identified with his plants. He had made her an Herb, and he was a gardener, and he had always identified with his plants.

It wasn’t her soul he wanted to sell, not really. She knew this. It wasn’t her soul he was frantic and desperate to save. Trauma sits in the brain like an ever-present actuality. Time, and the passage of time, and the difference between then and now are all completely lost on trauma. She knew this, and she knew he didn’t understand what he was doing. And she didn’t know how to manage it.

He had set the symbols. He had set their meaning, here, in the heady, special space of her office. He had set up the symbolic pieces they had to work with, and she hadn’t realized it until it was too late. Now, it was too late, and he was too frantic for her to fix it, to undo it, to right the ship before it sank any deeper.

She hadn’t responded to him. She had been quiet, silent, trying to think and parse and reason. She hadn’t responded, and she could see in his face that it was response enough. She could see the frantic energy and fear and pain crystallize and turn hard. He wasn’t okay. He was too tired, and he was too frantic, and he was terrifying her.

“Hold on, Crowley,” she said, to try to get him back. But he didn’t listen, he wasn’t listening. He couldn’t hear her, because, right now, she wasn’t Aubrey Thyme to him. She was something else to him, something distant and fragile and far too painful for him to think about and acknowledge directly. He didn’t hear her, and he wouldn’t hear her, and it was terrifying.

He nodded. He nodded, not to her, but to himself, and it was a nod that could break her heart open in two. He didn’t try to collect the contract from her—he would leave it there, leave it for her. But he stood up. He stood up, he moved, and he walked out the door.

He walked out the door, and he didn’t come back.
Dyadic Coping Strategies

Chapter Summary

Aubrey Thyme has an unexpected visitor, and it means she has to re-arrange her schedule.

The kindest man she had ever laid eyes on was currently sitting in her waiting area. He was sitting in her waiting area, and he was wearing Crowley’s sunglasses.

It was a jolt to her system to see him there. She hadn’t expected to see him. He hadn’t called ahead of time. He hadn’t set up an appointment. He was simply there, and she had to wonder how long he had been waiting.

He looked up and towards her as she stood in the doorway to her office. He smiled. She could feel that smile in her stomach, in her throat, but it wasn’t like before. It was a small, little smile, not like before. It was nothing more than a greeting.

That smile, it felt like the edge of a knife wrapped up in layers of gauze.

“Miss Thyme,” he said, and he stood. He looked like he was about to walk towards her, and he even took a short step in that direction, but then he stopped. “We have met before, if you recall.”

Yes, yes she did recall.

From her perspective, standing in her doorway, Aziraphale’s presence despite Crowley’s absence was both a good sign and a bad sign. It was a bad sign because it meant that, however Crowley was doing, it was dire enough that Aziraphale had sought her out. And he had sought her out, she could only assume, without Crowley’s knowledge. It was a good sign, on the other hand, because it meant, however dire Crowley’s situation may be, it wasn’t so dire that Aziraphale was completely bereft, completely undone. It meant, at the very least, that Crowley must still be alive.

She had done her due diligence, as much as she could. She had called. She had left voicemails. It was all that she could do, for a client whose circumstances were as unusual as Crowley’s. For the two weeks since Crowley had left, his name had kept showing up on her schedule during his regular slot. She didn’t know how. She hadn’t scheduled those appointments, and it wasn’t an automated system. She had assumed it was some sort of jab aimed at her, and it made her feel something other than pissed off. For both of those two weeks, she had waited the customary fifteen minutes for him to arrive, and then she had left a voicemail saying he had missed his appointment. That was all there was for her to do, for a client whose circumstances were as unusual as Crowley’s.

Aubrey Thyme took the imaginary card on which she had written, I’m a fucking hack, and she made sure it was safely filed away in her card catalog. It was cross-listed: it was filed under ‘S’ for Self, under ‘H’ for Hack, and under ‘Crowley.’ It was filed away, and there were three separate locks she could turn to make sure it stayed filed away.

“May I have a moment of your time?” Aziraphale asked.
He looked scared, and he looked nervous. In her memories, he wasn’t the sort of creature who could look scared or nervous. She made herself focus on the feeling of the gauze, and she tried to ignore the knife’s edge below it.

“Sure,” she said. She stepped back into her office, held the door open for him. “Come in.”

She didn’t really want him to come in. She didn’t want him in her office, not given how he had been there before. But it was the only thing to do. It was the only thing to do, so she invited him in.

He gave a small little nod of his head, like he was grateful. It was strange, thinking that a creature like him could be grateful towards her, grateful for something as simple as an invitation into her office during her business hours. He walked in. She could not tell if there really was a change in the air pressure as he passed by, or if that was just how it felt to her.

“I hope you will not judge me rude, for keeping these on,” he said, with a gesture to the sunglasses, as if he thought that the therapist who (used to) meet with Crowley weekly would be unaccustomed to sunglasses worn in her office. “I thought that these might--” He stopped himself, started again. “Well, as it was, last time. I thought--”

“Thank you,” she said, not interrupting so much as providing an act of mercy. “That’s very thoughtful of you.”

Aziraphale was not her client. She did not have a therapeutic relationship with him. But, still, he was in her office. He was a person, in her office, and she could tell that he was scared. She could tell that he was nervous. She was a professional, and she had substantial experience working with those who were scared and nervous. She had substantial experience working with the loved ones of her clients, when they had reason to be scared and nervous.

“Go ahead, have a seat,” she said.

There were, in total, three chairs in Aubrey Thyme’s office: the two armchairs, which were the primary focus, and a computer chair over by her desk. Aziraphale paused, and she watched as his attention moved from one of the chairs, to the next, to the third. He was so hesitant. He was so unsure, as if he was scared this was some sort of test and he didn’t know what would happen if he made the wrong choice.

Aubrey Thyme could be patient. Her next appointment wasn’t for an hour and a half, so she could be patient. She could be patient, so that he could make this decision at whatever pace he needed to feel safe. Ultimately, he sat in the most obvious chair, the chair that just about everyone sat in. He sat, in other words, in Crowley’s chair.

She realized, as he sat, that she didn’t want to sit across from him. She kept standing.

“It is, I must say, a bit of an experience. Wearing these, I mean.” He was talking, she thought, because he wasn’t sure what to say. “I never much considered what it must be like, wearing them in an environment such as this. I had always just assumed...”

She could tell, by how he was sitting, he didn’t know what to do with his hands. In her memories, he wasn’t the sort of creature who could be self-conscious.

“Well, I suppose you must know why I am here,” he said.

“I think so, but I also don’t want to make any assumptions. And also--” She winced quickly, because this would be an unpleasant complication. “I have to tell you, I don’t have permission to tell you anything. I can listen to what you have to say, but I can’t even confirm or deny whether
“someone is a client of mine.”

“Oh.”

Crowley would have laughed at her. He would have laughed in her face, or sneered in that way of his. He would have been unrelenting, until he got her to acknowledge how ridiculous it was, that she would refuse to acknowledge what they both knew was obviously true. Aziraphale had been here before. He had been here before, with Crowley. This legal formality really was ridiculous, and Crowley would have pushed until she admitted it. Aziraphale, she saw, simply accepted it.

“I can give you the paperwork for it,” she said. “You just need to get a signature, and then I can talk to you.”

“Paperwork,” he said, like a question.

She nodded. “It’s just a simple release of information. Just a single page. It just needs the signatures.” The paperwork was simple, but she had a strong suspicion getting the primary signature would not be.

“Oh, well…” One of his hands fluttered up to the sunglasses, started toying with them. He wasn’t comfortable in them. They didn’t fit his face. “In that case, could you check again?”

“What?”

“Your files,” he said. His tone grew more certain. “Could you check to see if you already have that paperwork on file?”

She knew she didn’t.

“Just, please, do check.” He nodded his head, like he was hopeful, like it was worthwhile for him to be insistent on the matter. It wouldn’t hurt for her to check, and so she would give him this.

She walked over to her file cabinet, unlocked it, opened it to the correct folder. She kept scanned copies in an encrypted folder on her computer, but, for Aziraphale’s sake, she thought it would be best to search in a way he could easily see. She flipped through the documents she had on file and… And she found it.

Or, at least, she found what she assumed was supposed to be it.

“This isn’t—” She frowned. She looked back at him. “Is this in Latin?”

“Oh. Right. Yes. We don’t do that anymore, do we?” He didn’t sound entirely perturbed. “Do check again, perhaps you simply misread it.”

Fucking demons and angels.

She looked back down and, yes, he was right: the document wasn’t in Latin. It was in English, some sort of English at least. It was in English, and it had something that looked a lot like her signature. And it had the mark that was, undeniably, Crowley’s signature.

“Well, how about that,” she deadpanned.

“You see?” He sounded so hopeful, again. “So easy, for something like that to simply get lost in the shuffle until you have a chance to go look for it.”

“Right,” she said.
If it had been Crowley in the seat, and if the need for proper documentation had been established, the lack of it would have been the end of discussion. Aziraphale was different, though. Crowley always insisted on playing games by his own rules; Aziraphale, she understood, did something different.

It was what she needed. It had the signatures, or close enough. It was in English, or close enough. It was the veneer of respectability that she could use to allow herself to do what she had wanted to do, in the first place.

She put the document back in the file, closed it up. She thought about moving back over to the two chairs, but she decided against it. She didn’t want to keep standing, it felt wrong. But she also didn’t want to sit in her customary seat, across from him, where she had been sitting the last time he had been here. That, too, would have felt wrong. So, she sat, instead, in the computer chair by her desk.

“Oh, let’s talk,” she said. “Tell me what’s going on.”

Her desk wasn’t angled to make it easy for someone sitting in his chair to see her. Had it been Crowley in the seat, he would have pushed it around to face her, or he would have snarked at her until she moved, or he would have simply stood up and paced. Aziraphale didn’t. Instead, she watched as he twisted himself sideways in the chair, bending his neck so that he could face her. It looked uncomfortable. She wondered whether angels could feel uncomfortable.

“This is all my fault,” he said, and he looked like he was in pain. He couldn’t keep from toying with the sunglasses. It was so obvious he did not like wearing them. “I’m here because--well. Well, I was wondering, do you ever do house calls?”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t,” she lied.

“Might you reconsider?”

He kept toying with the sunglasses. It looked almost like a compulsion, like he didn’t know how to stop it. They didn’t fit his face, and it was so very obvious that angels could, in fact, feel uncomfortable, feel painfully uncomfortable. He looked so scared, and he sounded so hopeful. He sounded hopeful in a way she understood. It was the type of hope one feels when the only other option is desperation.

He was the most powerful fucking being she had ever encountered, and he was here because he had nowhere else to turn.

“Look,” she said, and she worked to get her voice to hold sympathy. “I think you can take those off, if you want.”

“Are you sure?” he asked. He was the kindest man she had ever laid eyes on.

“Keep them nearby.” She tried to smile. “But I think I’ll be okay.”

He was as hesitant with this as he was with anything. She didn’t remember him seeming so hesitant, not when she had seen him with Crowley. Although, she had to admit, she hadn’t seen him much, and her memory from that day wasn’t reliable. She waited for the time it took him to pull at the sunglasses, to remove them. He did it with his eyes facing downwards, and he kept his eyes aimed downwards as he folded the glasses up. He kept them, folded up, cradled in his hands.

She realized: they were precious to him. They were Crowley’s sunglasses, and so of course they were precious to him. Aziraphale was hopeful because his only alternative was desperation.
He looked up and she stifled a flinch.

She hadn’t needed to flinch. She was fine, at least for now. She could see his eyes, and they were just kind eyes. There was gauze covering the knife. She thought, perhaps, that there was something he was doing to keep his eyes simply kind. Or, she thought, perhaps there was something he had been doing, that previous time, and now he simply wasn’t. Either way, she could tell that he was both grateful and relieved to no longer have the sunglasses on. It was so strange, to think that he was someone who could feel both grateful and relieved because of her.

They had work to do.

“Tell me about his condition. How is he?” she asked.

A form of muted distress flickered across his face, and then he said, “He isn’t sleeping.”

“Okay.” She didn’t know what to make of that. “I thought neither of you actually needed to sleep.”

“No. That is, yes. Yes, you’re right. But, you see…” This was the point, she thought, when Crowley would have interjected in order to speed the conversation along. But Crowley wasn’t here, and Aziraphale had to manage it on his own. She had to wonder: if she had met Aziraphale first, if it were Aziraphale she took as the constant and Crowley as the other, what would she be able to see that Crowley lacked when Aziraphale was not there? “He’s acting like he’s sleeping. He’s in bed all the time. That is, in bed, or close enough. But he isn’t actually asleep. I can tell.”

She nodded. She nodded in order to say, I’m listening. She nodded, also, to say, I trust your judgment. He was not her client, but she had a professional’s eye for observing and assessing those who came into her office. She had a professional’s capacity to tell what type of nod someone who came into her office needed to be given.

“Has he ever done this before?” she asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“Why did you say this is all your fault?”

“What?” He was confused, just for a moment, until he was able to follow her. Then he looked pained. “Oh, it is, isn’t it? I should have-- Well, I had simply thought. I had thought, new world and all that.”

She had no idea what he was trying to say. She had thought, earlier, that an hour and a half would have been enough time. Now, she wasn’t so sure.

“I’m going to have to ask you to clarify that,” she said.

“I should have known better.”

“Huh.”

“He’s always getting mad ideas and running with them, isn’t he?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And I. Well. I know. I know how that goes. But I had thought.”

It was much harder to be patient, when she was listening to someone who wasn’t a client. “I don’t know what you’re trying to tell me,” she said.
“Oh!” Now he seemed surprised. He seemed surprised, and it seemed to distract him from his nerves. “Forgive me, I simply assumed you knew. I had rather thought this was something he had spoken to you about.”

*Get out with it already,* she thought, and then she felt bad for it. She hoped he couldn’t tell.

“You see, we have been talking through the prospect of moving in together,” he said.

*Jesus fuck,* she thought. And she really wished she hadn’t thought that. It didn’t even mean anything, and she wished she hadn’t thought that. She wished she hadn’t thought that, and there was something else she needed to be thinking about. There was something else, many other something elses in fact, that she needed her mind to be able to think about.

“To be honest with you,” she said, and she was putting a lot of work in keeping her expression plain, “I thought you two already did live together.”

“Oh, well.” Was he starting to blush? Did angels actually blush? “Perhaps as a practical matter, most of the time. We still do have our separate spaces.”

“Okay. Okay.” She let herself open and close her jaw a few times, letting her teeth bite down onto each other, so that it would be easier for her to think. “Who first suggested it?”

“He did, of course.”

*Of course.*

“When?”

“I suppose it was a few months ago, now.” He tried repositioning himself in his seat, but there wasn’t much for him to do. She had made it so he had to twist sideways to see her, so he would have to contort into an uncomfortable posture to see her. She had done that to him.

She tried to work through the timeline. It was vague, but not that vague. It was a pretty obvious timeline.

*Jesus fuck,* she thought again, and she really wished she would stop that.

It is important for a psychotherapist, like Aubrey Thyme, to remember that her clients’ lives never stop. They continue on with their lives, making choices and changes, flourishing or floundering, despite all the work within her office--and, sometimes, because of the work within her office. It is easy to forget this, to become comfortable, to become complacent. So much of what happened here, in this room, could be flashy and showy, easy to see and focus on, and it could be hard to remember that it was only one hour per week of the client’s whole life. It was only one hour per week, and there were so many other hours. There were so many other hours, in particular, when there was a whole month between one session and the next. It was easy to forget how much more there always was in a client’s life, and it was easy to rely on the client to bring up anything from all those other hours that needed their joint attention. It was easy to fall into the trap of expecting the client to be honest and open.

Anthony J. Crowley, that terrified, traumatized victim-shaped-like-a-demon son of a bitch had never, not ever, been honest and open with her. She had seen him for a liar, when they first met. She had seen that he was hiding, that he was always hiding, and then at some point she had allowed herself to forget this. She had allowed herself to stop looking for his tics, for his tells, for every sign that there was more below the surface that he wasn’t willing to let her see. She had allowed herself to forget that he held deep down inside him, secret, anything that hurt too much or
had the potential to hurt too much, anything and everything that mattered to him, everything he was too scared to let out. She had allowed herself to forget that his honesty had always been his currency, and he had always doled it out as a pittance, only ever in the way that let him feel in control and thereby safe. She had allowed herself to forget.

She had a card tucked away, she had it filed away, she had it under lock and key, cross-listed under ‘S’ and ‘H’ and ‘Crowley.’

“He had suggested, in fact, that we might move out of London,” Airaphale said. He looked guilty. He sounded hopeful in the way that masks desperation. “We had talked about a cottage, someplace nice, perhaps in the country.”

*Jesus fuck.*

She had pushed him to start processing his fall. She had pushed him to acknowledge it, to talk about it, to think about it. She had pushed him to confront his fall, right as he had been trying to crawl his way to the heaven he was terrified he couldn’t deserve.

*Fuck,* she thought. “Okay,” she said. She took a deep breath, and she turned her head to the side. She turned her head, to give herself a chance to find a path, to find a route, to think and strategize. And then, she turned her eyes back to Aziraphale.

“Okay,” she said again.

She had handouts. She always had these handouts. She kept them close. They were the handouts that she gave to her clients’ loved ones, when she thought it was necessary. They were the handouts she knew could be terrifying and frightening. They were the handouts, she knew, that were less terrifying and frightening than the circumstances that led to her giving them to her clients’ loved ones. She collected them, and then she scooted her computer chair away from her desk, closer to him.

She had a script, a script she followed when she had to give these handouts to her clients’ loved ones. It wasn’t a perfect script, and it was a script meant for humans. But it was a script, and scripts were comforting.

“I want you to know,” she started, and she knew how to make her voice. It wasn’t her soothing, calming voice. It was her voice that meant, *this is serious.* It was her voice that meant, *This is serious, but I’m here with you, and you can trust me.* She knew how to use this voice. She knew what she could do with this voice. “I understand how difficult this is for you. I understand. It’s not fair that you’re in this situation, and it’s not fair that you’re going to have to be strong enough to get through it. But you are, and you can, and I’m here to support you. Okay?”

She saw his eyes widen. They were scared eyes. She could look into scared eyes.

“And I also want to make sure you understand,” she went on, “that it’s my job to worry about all the ways that things can go wrong. That’s what my job is. So, right now, we’re going to talk about worst case scenarios, and we’re going to talk about safety precautions.”

He looked stricken. His eyes went wider, and he looked stricken.

She took a deep breath. It was the sort of obvious, theatrical deep breath that was meant to get another’s attention. She could look into the wide, stricken eyes of someone who was scared.

“This is just about being careful,” she went on. This was serious, and she was here for him, and he could trust her. “Again, just safety precautions, because it’s my job to think through worst case
scenarios. You get me?”

He nodded. She saw how he nodded, and she thought that he had done it just because she had asked a question of him, just because he thought it was what was expected of him. She thought, he hadn’t nodded because he actually wanted to. He hadn’t nodded because he actually got her. She watched, as his fingers flexed and curled, compulsively, unrelentingly, around the sunglasses he still had in his hands.

“You’re strong, Aziraphale,” she understated. She could tell, he didn’t know it was understatement. “Now, I’m going to have to ask you some questions, and we’re going to have to work together. The questions I have weren’t meant for people like you and Crowley. So, I’m going to have to ask you to listen closely, and you have to let me know if there are different questions I should be asking instead.”

He was listening, but he was struggling to process it. He was struggling. She knew how to sit, she knew how to sound, she knew how to look into another’s eyes, as if to say, *It’s okay if you’re struggling, because I’m here for you, and I am not struggling.*

“Oh?” she asked.

“Yes,” he whispered.

“First question. Does he have access to any firearms?”

“What?” He seemed confused. Right: these questions weren’t meant for people like him.

“This is America, sorry. That’s always our first question. I guess what I mean is, does he have access to anything he could use to hurt himself?”

She saw the answer. She saw it in his eyes. She always could look into the eyes of someone who was terrified.


He was thinking slowly. He was too terrified, now, to think in any way but slowly. She understood it. She was used to her client who would speed up as much as he could to outpace whatever might upset him, but she was faced, now, with someone who slowed down as much as he could to evade whatever might threaten him. It was a matter of pacing.

It took him time to understand her question, to work through it, to think out his answer. But then he nodded.

He nodded to her, and so she nodded back to him. She was working to keep him with her.

“Okay. Third question. This isn’t forever. Just a few more questions, that’s all.” She nodded to him, again. She could keep his eye contact. “Third question. What are you going to do to take care of yourself?”

That question, she could tell, he couldn’t parse. He couldn’t make sense of it, she could tell. She could tell, that was a question that had never occurred to him before, that he had never thought to try to answer before. He wasn’t her client, but he was in her office, and he was seated before her, and he was terrified, and she couldn’t help but see him as a child, a child who had never been allowed to learn how to ask for his needs to be met. She couldn’t help but feel all the many different ways her heart could completely break apart. She couldn’t help but feel that way, but it wasn’t her job right now to let it show.
“This is hard,” she said. “This is very hard, and you’re going to need to take care of yourself. That has to be a central part of our plan, Aziraphale. So, that’s where we’re going to start first. Okay?”

“Okay,” he agreed, and his voice was small and wavering. He was the most powerful fucking being she had ever encountered, and his voice was small and wavering. He reached for a tissue, all without putting down the sunglasses, and then he dabbed it against his eyes.

They had practical matters to attend to. They had work to do. She had handouts to explain to him, to give to him, and they had contingencies to work through. She had to help him develop a self-care plan. This was her job. Aubrey Thyme may have a card, hidden under lock and key, filed away under ‘S’ and ‘H’ and ‘Crowley,’ but she still knew she had a job to do.

She had to excuse herself, at one point, to ask her next client to reschedule. It was okay, because it was Maya, and Maya was low risk. Maya was very low risk, and she had been very low risk, ever since her sister had been found miraculously alive and well, all those months ago, after having been lost at sea for years. Maya was low risk, and so it was okay to ask her to reschedule, because the schedule for a professional therapist like Aubrey Thyme was always structured, first and foremost, around the matter of risk.

When they were done, when Aziraphale was grounded, when they had a plan and she felt she could safely let him leave, she watched as he stood. She watched as he walked to the door, as he held those sunglasses fierce and tight in his hand. She watched as he hovered at the doorway, and he looked so scared and hesitant and unsure. She watched him, and she could not understand how a being like this could have existed for as long as he had and still not know that he was good, that he was good enough, that he was more than good enough, that he was good just exactly and precisely as he was.

“Aziraphale,” she called out to him, as he hovered in the doorway, hesitant and unsure. He turned to look at her, and he had eyes that she could look straight into without fear.

He wasn’t her client, but he was a person, and he was suffering, and she needed him to understand that he could be brave.

“You’re stronger than you think,” she said, and she meant it, and she knew it was true. “I believe in you. And you know Crowley believes in you too.”

So much could pass across his face, all in an instant, and it was enough to break her heart completely in two.

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Forty-five minutes later, her office phone lit up. It didn’t ring. There was only one phone she had in her office that had its ringer turned up, and it wasn’t her office line. But the office line would light up when it had a call, and she recognized the international code, so she answered.

“You frightened Aziraphale,” he said. His voice was thick, sleep-drunk and groggy. Aziraphale had said, he hadn’t been sleeping. That wasn’t good.

“He was already frightened,” she said.

“I don’t like people who frighten Aziraphale,” he said.

The good thing was, she could make any number of faces and roll her eyes as viciously as she needed, while talking on the phone.
“I’m glad to hear from you,” she said.

There were thick and slurred sounds of annoyance, and then the call disconnected.

Her arms wanted to shake, but she wouldn’t let them. Her jaw wanted to clench, but she wouldn’t let it. She took deep breaths, and she kept her eyes on the clock. Fifteen minutes, that was her standard. She would call him back in fifteen minutes.

She didn’t need to, though. It was less than twenty seconds, before her phone, her other phone, rang. It was the phone whose ringer she always had turned up, the only phone she brought into her office and which she would allow to ring. It was her cell phone, the one which was never supposed to ring. It was the cell phone whose number she gave to her clients.

She answered.

“I said, I’m glad to hear from you.”

He was sleep-drunk and groggy, despite the fact that he had apparently not been sleeping. He was sleep-drunk and groggy, and that meant that a phone call like this could take a very long time.

“I called you,” he said.

“Yes. Yes, you called, and I answered, and I’m glad to hear from you.”

He had called her. She had told him before, there was only one sort of situation when he should ever call this number. She had told him before, there was only one thing it would mean, if he called this number. This phone’s ringer was always turned up, because this was a phone she always answered. This was a phone she always answered, and she wouldn’t hang up so long as it took.

She would keep him on the line. She would make sure he would talk. She would keep him on the line, and she would keep him talking, and she would keep it up until she was sure that he could see that there was a way for them to move forward.

This was her job. This was the sort of thing she was trained to do. It was the sort of thing that no training in the world could ever make one feel professionally prepared for. It was the sort of thing that always, always made one cross-list cards under ‘S’ and ‘H’. But it was her job, and it was what she was here to do.
She could hear the echo from her shoes tapping against the floor, as she walked through the hallway, and she didn’t like it. She didn’t like the echo, and she didn’t like the hallway.

“Please, do make yourself at home,” Aziraphale said, and, no, Aubrey Thyme would not be making herself at home.

She was trying to observe and assess as much as she could, as she took in the look of the hallway. This was one of the benefits to in-home therapy, after all. A person’s home could tell you so much about them which you might otherwise not get to learn. There is an entire system of things and people and habits that could help you make sense of the diagnosable symptomology, all observable and assessable once you encounter the client in his own space. That was only one of the benefits of in-home therapy, and Aubrey Thyme wanted to take full advantage of it. She wanted to, but she found it difficult to focus on what she could see, given that she was so distracted by how it all felt.

There are too many walls, she thought, and she didn’t understand why. She didn’t know why it felt that way to her. She didn’t know, entirely, what it was she was trying to express about the space she was in, when she thought that. She was certain she could count the walls, that she could account for the basic geometry of the space she was in, but she didn’t feel like she could. There were too many walls, it felt like, and not anywhere near enough windows or doors. Maybe it was the echo. Maybe the echo was playing tricks on her mind.

“May I offer you some tea?” Aziraphale asked, as helpful and kind and hopeful as always.

“Thank you, but no,” she said.

“Perhaps coffee?”

“No, thank you, really.” She didn’t want to accept anything. She didn’t want to accept even a single pomegranate aril while in this space.

“Oh--root beer, then?”

“What?”

“We don’t have any, of course, but I do believe I could--”

“Tea, Aziraphale!” came the exasperated yell from somewhere down the hallway. “Tea’s fine. Just bring some tea, it’s fine.”

So that was that, then.
She watched as small hints of relief moved across Aziraphale’s face, and she realized how cruel she had just been. He wanted to be a good host, even though this was not technically his apartment—his flat. He had needed an opportunity to act, to offer, to provide, and she had denied it. So Crowley, good old lovable Crowley, had intercepted. He could be a real asshole–arsehole–but he always made sure to take care of Aziraphale.

“Just down that way,” Aziraphale gestured, as if there were any need after Crowley’s shout. “I’ll be in with the tea.”

Aziraphale went off some other way, some other direction in the hallway, and left her to finish the journey by herself. The echo from her shoes accompanied her to the doorway (?), and then she entered the room.

This was something that they had spoken about, at length. They had spoken about comfort levels, about safety, about boundaries. She had prompted him to consider what it would be like, for him, to have her in his space. She had, herself, attempted to consider what it would be like to be in his space. They had discussed, at length, what it would and wouldn’t mean for her to step into his hallway, into his flat, into his living space, and even into his bedroom.

This was the challenge and opportunity of in-house therapy. It required very clear ground rules.

They had had plenty of time to talk through every angle of it. After his first phone call, she had gotten him to agree to two calls a day. She had insisted: one in the morning, and one in the evening. He had pushed for her to accept the calls later in the day, given the time difference between them, but she had refused. He had said that the diurnal schedules of humans were irrelevant to him, but she didn’t thoroughly believe it. And so, for the last few weeks, she had been waking every morning at 4am, in order to talk to him on the phone, and then she kept her schedule empty at 4pm, in order to talk to him on the phone again.

They had talked. They had talked daily, twice daily, without seeing each other. He hadn’t come to her office. He wouldn’t. He had rejected every offer to set up an appointment. He would talk to her, but only on his terms, only if he could do so without coming back in person. He had told her, after all, that he wouldn’t come back. He wouldn’t come back, unless she accepted his terms.

Aziraphale had asked her if she did house calls, and she had said no. He asked a second time, and again she said no. The third time she was asked, the time that Crowley was the one who asked, she stopped lying and said yes.

So, they had planned. They had planned, and they had prepared. If nothing else, it gave them something to talk about during their twice-daily phone calls. They had needed something to talk about, given the unspoken understanding between them that it wasn’t yet time, not yet, to broach the topic of the unsigned contract, about his unwillingness to come back, about the breach in their therapeutic alliance. They had needed something to talk about, because crisis intervention isn’t the same as therapy, not really, and he needed time to stabilize before they could get back to work. They had needed time.

Now, they had a week. Or, almost a week—she was flying home on the final day, so it didn’t really count. They had a week, minus a day. There was a lot for them to do, a lot she hoped they would be able to do, within the span of a week, minus a day. She had thought, perhaps, she could manage it in just five days, but it was good to have a spare, to have extra time. The timeline of therapy could be unpredictable.

They had a week, or more accurately a week minus a day, and this was day one.
She stepped into his room, and she gave herself a moment to observe and assess.

The whole of this place felt strange and uncomfortable, and his bedroom was no different. The strangeness and discomfort, in fact, was even stronger in here. There was, first, the layout. She couldn’t shake the thought, that incomprehensible and incoherent thought, that there were too many walls. There was no window in here, either. It was a dark place, it was a lair. She was standing, here, in a demonic lair.

There was, second, the matter of the lighting. It was dark, in his lair, but it was not too dark. She could see, but she wasn’t sure why. She noticed just one lamp, but it didn’t seem to be giving off enough light to account for how well she could see. She thought, perhaps, if she focused too hard on the shadows and attempted to use them to find all the sources of the available light, she would end up with vertigo or worse. It was best, she decided, simply to ignore it.

There was, third, the matter of the smell. There was a certain smell that Aubrey Thyme had come to expect when doing in-house therapy with clients like this. It was a musty, tangy smell, the smell of too much dried sweat and unwashed clothing, the smell of a human body after weeks of neglect. That smell wasn’t present. It surprised her, how much she could be unsettled by the lack of such an unpleasant smell. The room, instead, smelled fairly normal. It smelled like Crowley, yes, but it was not overpowering. So far as her olfactory sense was concerned, the room was entirely unremarkable, and that was what she noticed.

There was, fourth, the matter of furniture. There was a bed, in the room. She had been expecting the bed. She wasn’t worried about it. With other clients, especially cisgender heterosexual male clients, in-house therapy in a room containing a bed was something to worry about. But this was Crowley, not someone else, and neither of them was concerned about the bed. There was also, in the room, a chair. It was a plain wooden chair, the kind of chair one would expect in an unassuming kitchen. It didn’t belong, not in a place like this. It didn’t belong, and it didn’t belong in much the same way that Aziraphale looked like he didn’t belong. It was, clearly, a chair that had been placed ahead of time, in preparation for her.

What struck her as odd, about the furniture, was the lack of it beyond the bed and the chair. There was no closet, not that she could see. There was no dresser, at least not that she could see. There was, in fact, no place that she could see where clothing could be stored away. It was a strange lack. This wasn’t a space that had been designed with practicalities like storage in mind.

And there was, fifth and finally, the matter of her client. He wasn’t in bed. She had expected him to be in bed. She knew, while he had been willing in recent days to get up and even leave his flat occasionally, he still wanted to spend most of his time in bed. But he wasn’t there. He was, instead, curled up in a ball, deep in the farthest corner in the room, tucked up tight right against the ceiling.

“It’s good to see you,” she said, looking up.

“Is it?” he said, turning his head to stare at her, and his tone told her all she needed to know. “I thought, maybe, your plan was to come all this way just to talk with Aziraphale.”

Yes, his tone told her all she needed to know. It told her where they were. It was where they had been, since Aziraphale’s visit to her office. This tone, and its meaning, had been a constant theme in her phone calls with Crowley. It was repetitive, this unrelenting bitterness. It was exhausting.

She got the full brunt of the bitterness, she knew. Aziraphale got none of it. She was the one blamed for the forgery, not him. She was the one blamed for frightening Aziraphale, and Crowley wouldn’t let her forget it. Crowley, she suspected, could hold a grudge longer than it would take for her bones to turn to ash, if he really wanted to.
They had a week, minus a day, to work past that bitterness. They had a week, minus a day, to get everything back on track.

Somebody help her, they only had six days.

She stepped farther into the room. She let her bag down onto the floor, and then she sat in the chair. She crossed one leg over the other, and she held her hands in her lap. She sat, with his bitterness, with his silence, and she waited for the tea she did not want.

It would have been easier, if only there had been a clock on any of the walls. There wasn’t. She should have brought a watch.

The sound of Aziraphale making his way into the room cut through the silence, but not the displeasure that Crowley was radiating at her. Aziraphale made small little comments, as he set down a tray on the edge of the bed closest to her chair. The tray held a single cup of tea and a bowl of sugar. The tray held no saucer of milk, because of course Aziraphale would have known already that she didn’t drink milk. She could only wonder, in terror, how much he knew about her.

She gave a smile, although she didn’t exactly look at him. “Thank you,” she said, and she tried to mean it.

Aziraphale looked down at the tray, at the cuppa, at her, and it seemed as if he were working out some sort of painful logic puzzle. “Oh!” he exclaimed, apparently having solved the problem. “I almost forgot!”

He hurried back out. Leaving her, again, with silence and a very bitter demon.

She decided, she might as well count the seconds until he returned. Twenty-three, in total, it took. Twenty-three seconds later, Aziraphale hurried back in. He hurried in, he made his way back to the tray, and he set down a large glass that was filled to the brim with ice.

She glanced up to Crowley. She glanced at him with an expression that said, why? Crowley just glared.

“There!” Aziraphale said, and he sounded both pleased and relieved. “There, you must be all set now.”

“Uh, yes. Thank you,” she said.

“Alright. Yes. Yes.” Aziraphale was looking about the room, glancing up at Crowley, reaching out his hands now and then as if certain there was something he should straighten or fix. But there wasn’t. There wasn’t anything for him to do, not now. “I’ll be here, in case anything should be needed. Do not hesitate to ask, Miss Thyme, not at all.”

“Thank you,” she said, again. What she needed was for him to just leave already.

“Well--” Aziraphale glanced up again, up towards Crowley, and Aubrey Thyme could see the smile he gave to the bitter demon in the corner. She saw that smile, she saw just how much imploring hope it contained, and she felt relief it had not been aimed at her. “I’ll leave you to it, then.”

Finally, he was gone.

They had worked out a schedule, ahead of time, over the phone. It was important to have a schedule and to stick to it, when doing intensive in-home therapy. The schedule was this: she
would arrive at 9am (4am. For her, it was 4am), and she would say until 11am. Then, she would take a two hour lunch. She would return at 1pm, and she would stay until 4pm. At that point, they would call it a day. They would call it a day, when it was 11am in her home time, and she wouldn’t come back until 9am the next day.

She had taken a red-eye flight, to get here by 9am for the first day. She had taken a red-eye flight, and she had journeyed through the worst, deepest depths of Heathrow, just so she could get to him, to sit here with him. And he wanted to pretend he hated her for it.

That was fine. Let him pretend. That was, in her mind, what this day was all about. Day one, this day, was going to be all about denial.

She stopped counting the seconds somewhere around one hundred and thirty-eight. She lost count, and it didn’t matter. She would wait as long as it took, for Crowley to be willing to talk.

“If you don’t drink the tea,” he finally said, “he’s going to worry he did something wrong.”

“I thought it might be yours,” she lied. “You’re the one who asked for it.”

“We don’t have many visitors,” he said, and he shifted his posture. He uncoiled, just slightly. “He’s trying to be hospitable.”

“I appreciate it,” she said, and she worked so it wasn’t a lie. “I don’t get the ice, though.”

“You’re American.” He uncoiled a bit more. “You drink root beer, and you drink tea with ice in it, you heathen.”

Aubrey Thyme and Crowley, before everything went wrong, had an ongoing disagreement about Crowley’s and Aziraphale’s nationality. Crowley had insisted that they were not English, that they could not be English, that calling them English was just a product of her overactive, ridiculously human instinct to classify things she did not actually understand. She, for her part, had insisted that if it looks like a duck, quacks like a duck, and thinks so terribly sorry to hear it is an appropriately heartfelt response to a friend’s sobbing confession that he thought you had died, then what you’ve got is an English duck. They had agreed to disagree, at the time. Now, it felt as though, in the last few minutes, she had scored a fairly significant point for her side in the debate.

It would have been nice, if she and Crowley could be on the sort of terms, again, that allowed that sort of debate to take place.

“If you stay up there all day,” she said, still not touching the tea, “then I’m going to get a crick in my neck.”

He was bitter, and he was petty, and he was as much of a son of a bitch as ever, but he was also, as always, generous and gentle. She had made clear a need, and so he would meet it. She watched as he uncoiled completely and then pulled himself across the ceiling. She watched as he used his arms and legs to bring himself down the wall, until he was at his headboard, and then he somehow changed his relationship to gravity so that he was lying down. It should have disrupted the tea tray, but it didn’t.

She wouldn’t make jokes about *The Exorcist*. She felt like making jokes about *The Exorcist*. He wouldn’t like those jokes, though, and so she wouldn’t make them.

He coiled up again. He coiled up, angled so he could keep on glaring at her. He was satisfied in his ability to glare at her.
“Let’s talk about this,” she said, as a way to start. “What’s it like, having me in your personal space?”

“Don’t like it.”

“It feels like an intrusion,” she said.

“It is an intrusion,” he said.

“You invited me here.”

“It’s not poison, just drink the bloody tea.”

She did not want to drink the bloody tea.

“It really is good to see you,” she tried to redirect. “It’s been a long time.”

“You’re not dead yet, so it couldn’t have really been that long, could it?”

She sighed.

There were a variety of options available for her, in way of response. She had thought through the variety of options available to her, because she had been prepared for him to be like this. She had thought through these options, before she had arrived. She had thought through them, as she failed to sleep on her red-eye flight. She had thought through them, as she was jumbled and corralled through Heathrow. She had thought through them, as she checked into her hotel at 7am (2am) and dropped off her luggage. She had put a lot of thought into them.

She could say, *I understand why you are so angry*, but they had gone down that road before. They had had that conversation, again and again, over the phone, and it had been completely unfruitful each time. She could say, *Aziraphale and I were worried about you*, but they had gone down that road before, too. He didn’t accept it. *She* was the one who had frightened Aziraphale, not *him*, never *him*, he held no responsibility for any of his shitty behavior, did he? She could say, *What would it take for you to trust me again?* But she knew the answer. He knew the answer. She had brought the unsigned contract in her luggage, because that was the reason that she was here, when she had a perfectly comfortable office in her own goddamned country.

She had a lot of options. She had put a lot of thought into her options. And she had decided, she had realized, she had come to accept, that what she would have to do is be open and honest. She had to be open and honest with him.

“Fuck off,” she said, and she meant it, because this was her being open and honest. “What I’m telling you is, I’ve missed you.”

She watched as his glare turned confused. *Take that, you son of a bitch*, she thought. His glare turned confused, and then it softened.

“Now,” she said. She pulled the bag she had brought up from the floor, onto her lap. “You’ve got a choice. Go fish, checkers, or tic-tac-toe.”

“Ugh,” he groaned out, as if she had just asked which pile of rotting garbage he’d like her to toss into his bed.

“Just choose one,” she said.
She had not asked, *would you like to play a game?* A yes or no question like that would have made it too easy for him to say no. And here, in this encounter, she was going to insist on them playing a game. She knew, it would be easier to insist, if he did not have the option of resisting first. She put the expectation out there, so it would be harder for him to resist.

She also had not asked for him to choose from only two options. Being presented with two options can feel like being given two extremes, and it can be hard to choose between extremes. Three options, on the other hand, comes with a middle, and the middle almost always feels safest. Most of the time, people will choose the middle option, out of three. Aubrey Thyme wanted him to choose the middle option.

“Did you really bring a deck of cards in here?” he asked.

“Yes, and a checkers board, and some other things.”

“Listen,” he said, and he leaned his head a little closer to her, and he lowered his voice just enough. “Do not let Aziraphale know there is a deck of cards in here.”

_Huh_, she thought. All the sudden, he was willing to behave like a co-conspirator with her. She wondered why, but she also knew better than to take the bait. One primary challenge of in-home therapy is the risk of triangulation between different family members. It was easy to become enmeshed in others’ disputes, when engaging in in-home therapy. And it was vitally important that she not allow that to happen at all.

“Just choose,” she said. “Go fish, checkers, or tic-tac-toe.”

“It’s not called checkers over here,” he breathed out, annoyed but resigned.

“No? Huh.” Nothing could be easy, could it? She pulled the checkers board out of her bag, as if he had agreed to play. She pushed the tea tray slightly to the side, so she could start setting up the board. “Are the rules the same?”

“Doesn’t matter,” he said. He pushed himself into a more upright position, drawing himself closer to the board. “I’m just going to cheat.”

“That’s fine.” She started laying out the pieces. “Just try not to make it so obvious that I can tell.”

This wasn’t about the game. It didn’t matter who won or lost, and it didn’t matter if he cheated. What mattered was that it could be a joint activity, between them. What mattered was that it forced him to sit a bit more upright. What mattered was that moving the pieces involved some physical movement and concentration, but not too much. What mattered was that, if he didn’t cheat too obviously, then that meant, at the very least, he would have to stay attentive to the sort of goal-oriented activity involved in following the rules of a game.

“Want red or black?” she asked.

“Don’t care.”

“Choose.” The color didn’t matter. The act of making choices, however, did.

“Red.”

“Okay, you’ll go first. Help me get all the pieces set up.”

Crowley, as much of a son of a bitch as they both knew he was, was also generous and gentle, and
he liked having the chance to be helpful.

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“Is this really what you’re billing me for?” he said, that afternoon, after they had played a mind-numbing amount of checkers, after she had gone to lunch and then returned, after she had started setting the checkers board back up.

When she had returned, the tray was gone. Aziraphale didn’t seem upset, so she assumed Crowley had done something with the untouched tea. She would try to be more polite, tomorrow.

“A trans-Atlantic flight, seven nights in a hotel, and bills for five hours a day, and we’re just going to play checkers?” he went on.

The cost of the trip had been a contentious topic for them, over their phone calls, as they had prepared. Crowley, she knew, did not actually have any financial concerns. He had at first arranged for her to fly first class, and she had balked. Then he had gotten Aziraphale to set up the hotel reservation for her, and she had really balked when she saw just where they thought to put her up. She had made demands: business class tickets, business class hotel, absolutely nothing nicer than that. He was needling her, now, about it, or at least he was trying to.

“Yes,” she said. She wouldn’t be needled. She would, however, be open and honest. She would try, at least, to be open and honest. “We’re playing checkers, because I want us to have some time to just be together, before we get to the hard work.”

“Uh-huh,” he said. He sounded wary.

“And it’s helping me assess just how depressed you still are.” Open and honest.

“Oh?” He tilted his head a bit.

“Mm-hmm.” She didn’t go on. They had a game to play.

“So, is Dave filling in for you again?” he asked, after a few more rounds, after they were both so sick of checkers that even talking about Dave was a better option.

“He is, indeed,” she said, and she nodded. She leaned back a bit in her chair--the wooden chair, which could only stay reasonably comfortable for about an hour at most--and she decided that she was satisfied he had brought up the topic. “Let’s talk about Dave,” she said.

“I told you,” he said low and fast, “I’m sorry about that.”

No, actually. No, he had never said that. What he had said, previously, time and time again, had been It’s not my fault. He had never, not until now, said the word sorry in relation to Dave. That was interesting, she thought, but it wasn’t what she wanted to focus on, not right now.

“Not that,” she said. “No, what I want to talk about is this. Why do you think I asked Dave to fill in for me?”

“Huh?” His lip curled upwards, confused and annoyed by it.

“Why Dave?”

“Why not Dave?”

She shrugged. “You know how many other therapists there are in Rochester? Plenty. I could’ve
chosen any of them. So why do you think I chose Dave, out of all of them?"

“Because…” He didn’t have the words for it. He was confused. It was as if she had asked him, why is water wet. “He’s your Dave, who else would you ask?”

“Oh-huh,” she said, and she nodded. She waited a moment, biting at her lip, looking down at the half-finished game of checkers between them. “So, what does that mean? To say he’s my Dave?”

“I should hope you’d know that,” he snarked.

_Pulling teeth_, she thought. She would change tacks. “Let’s try a basic analogy.” She could tell she was getting a bit pushy, so she brought their attention back to the game. She took her turn—she couldn’t remember whether it was supposed to be hers or his turn next, but it didn’t really matter. “I am to Dave, as you are to…”

“Aziraphale,” he said. He said it like, _duh._

_Oh, you sweet idiot_, she thought, and she chuckled a little. Just slightly. Not too much. She chuckled the amount that felt honest, for how she was feeling. “So, think about that. What makes you think Dave is my Aziraphale?”

He didn’t respond. So, she prodded: “Your move.”

He still didn’t respond, but he did take his turn.

“Crowley, I barely know Dave. I’ve never interacted with him socially. I don’t _want_ to interact with him socially. He’s a colleague, but he’s not a friend, and I don’t want him to be a friend. So, you know why I asked him to fill in for me?” She raised her eyebrows, looked at him, waited for him to be curious. She took her turn. “Because his office is right down the hall from mine. That’s it. He’s convenient, that’s why.”

Crowley was thinking. She could see it in his eyes, the way they moved this way and that.

“Kind of a mystery, isn’t it?” she said, not mystified by it at all, falling back into old habits, failing, in the moment, to be wholly open and honest. “You made some pretty major assumptions about me and Dave, just because I gave you his business card. Your move.”

He moved a piece. It wasn’t really a _move_ in checkers, just him moving a piece. If he kept that up for another turn or two, she’d switch them to go fish, whatever the deal with Aziraphale and playing cards may be.

“This is how therapy works,” she went on, remembering herself again, working again towards being open and honest. “It’s how the therapeutic relationship works. You have Aziraphale, and so you assume I have an Aziraphale too. You only hear me mention a single name, Dave’s, and you assume he must be my Aziraphale. You take your _stuff_ --” she reached out, with a hand, gesturing to the whole of him--”and you see _me_ through the lens of it.” She brought her hand back, gesturing now as if placing an invisible hat on her head.

She took her turn.

“This is why boundaries are so important, for the type of work we’re doing,” she said, while sitting in his bedroom. “You’re my client, Crowley, and this is how a client connects to his therapist.”

He was looking down. He was thoughtful. They only had five and a half days left.
“You’re not a cipher,” he said. He picked up a checkers piece, as if to take a move, but he just held it in his hand. He was looking down at the board. “I know you, Aubrey.”

He called her Aubrey. She hadn’t been Herb, not once, not since Aziraphale had come to her office. She felt weighted down by a sadness.

“You do, and I wouldn’t have it any other way,” she said. There was vulnerability that came with being open. There was weakness that came with honesty. “I’m not saying you don’t know me. You just know me through a certain lens. Same as we all only know anyone, through some certain lens or another.”

She thought she could see it: she thought he wanted to say, No, I know Aziraphale, not through a lens but through all of them. He stopped himself, though. He put the piece he had been holding back down. He hadn’t cheated. He put it right where it had been when he picked it up.

They couldn’t just pretend to play checkers all day.

“I think we have to start talking about the hard things,” she said.

He sighed. He pushed the checkers board off to the side. He kept looking down at it.

“Let me ask you this. Am I the first human you’ve ever known who’s been at risk of being damned?” she asked. She asked it, like she knew the answer. She asked it that way, because they both knew the answer.

“Don’t be stupid,” he said.

“There’ve been more of them than either of us could possibly count, huh?”

“More than you could, at least.”

“So, here’s the question.” She put one foot up on the edge of the bed, so she could lean the chair on its back two legs. She folded her arms in front of her. “Is it always this terrible for you, when you come across a human who’s at risk of damnation?”

That question wasn’t entirely open and honest. She was working at it. She was working their way up to it. She wanted to be open and honest, she did, but she knew it would take time.

She waited for him to put the puzzle together, to connect this to Dave, to understand her meaning.

“You take your stuff,” she repeated, “and you see me through the lens of it.”

“So what you’re saying is…” He sounded annoyed. “The reason I’m angry with you is because I’m actually angry at myself.”

“Well--” she stopped herself. She was about to say, does that sound right to you? But that wasn’t what she was here to do. She was here, instead, to be open and honest. To try to be open and honest. “That’s not exactly what I meant. I mean, you’re probably right. We should probably talk about whether you’re angry with yourself… But what I was thinking about, actually, was why it’s so painful and terrifying for you to think about me being damned.”

She watched him. He was quiet and thoughtful. They were approaching the topic, this time, from a very intellectual position. It allowed distance and thus safety, to intellectualize that which had the potential to hurt so much.
She watched him. She watched, as he lowered himself back to a horizontal position, curled himself back up into fetal position. No--not fetal position. He had never been a fetus. He was simply curled up, like something small, like something that knew to protect its belly.

She needed to be open and honest. This was what he needed, she thought. She hoped she had it right. She hoped she was right, that what he needed was for her to be open and honest.

“I made a really big mistake, in working with you,” she said, and she kept her arms folded in front of her, folded securely in front of her most vulnerable self. “I’m really sorry. You deserve better.”

She wanted those words to hang in the air. She wanted them, there, in this space, his most private space. He deserved better. He deserved something, anything. He deserved better.

There was still time until their working day was over. She sat, jet-lagged, in an uncomfortable wooden chair, and she wasted away the time by browsing the internet on her phone. She had nothing to do, nothing to do except be, be there, be there with him, be a breathing presence who could care and who would stay, who could apologize for past mistakes, who could offer an attempt to do better in the future.

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On the second day, she was confronted, again, with a tray, and a cup of tea, and a glass filled to the brim with ice. She said thank you, and she resolved again to take not one aril, not one, not anything.

It was a relief, when Aziraphale declared that he would be leaving them to go to the bookshop today. Aziraphale, as well, looked relieved by it. She had to wonder how much he had managed, in recent weeks, to attend to his own self-care. She had to wonder how much he despised this flat, and how much it cost him, emotionally, to spend so much time within its echoing walls. She had to wonder how much time he had spent recently, sitting in this same wooden chair, or some other uncomfortable space, tending to a bitter and sad demon.

It was a relief, when Aziraphale declared that he would be leaving. It was a relief, because she had been really uncomfortable with the idea of him being around, given what she planned on discussing with her client today.

She waited until he was gone, until they had both heard the front door close behind him. Then, she reached into her bag, pulled out a folder, pulled out the unsigned contract, and placed that paper down on the corner of the bed. She placed it so that it was visible in the space between them.

“I’ll make a counter offer,” she said.

She had his attention. He was sitting, on the far side of the bed, with his knees up in front of him. His eyes looked out at her from within his self-made fortress of bony limbs.

“I want you to listen to me,” she said. “I want you to let me say everything I want to say, and I want you to listen to me. And then I’ll make my counter offer.”

He regarded her. Then, he nodded his head.

“We’re going to keep track of your distress level, too,” she said. “I want you to listen, and I want you to also tell me if you get anywhere above thirty. I don’t want to be talking at you when you’re in too much pain to actually listen.”

She had his attention. A flick of his eyes: he accepted her terms.
“Also, I want you to tell me, right now. Is there anything I can say that can cause you harm?” She was annoyed at herself, because she didn’t know how to form the question she meant to ask. “You know what I mean. Anything that...” She waved her arms, she didn’t know what she was doing. “You know.”

He opened his mouth, like he had intended to say something but then changed his mind.

“No,” he said, simply.

“Okay, good.” She nodded her head. She gave herself a moment to shore herself up. She sucked at her teeth, she repositioned herself in her wooden chair, and she looked at him. “Are you ready to listen to me?”

His eyes were on her, as they had been. He made a flourish with his hand which meant, go ahead.

She took a deep breath, and she did what she could to make herself be open and honest in every way she found uncomfortable.

“I like you, Anthony J. Crowley,” she said. She said it. “I like you, and I like getting to work with you. You’re smart, and I like your sense of humor, and I like that you can be a complete son of a bitch.”

She watched him. She watched him closely. He knew she was watching him, and he wasn’t looking her in the eye.

She wanted to be in her office, in her space, in her chair, with her clock on the wall, and her rules, where she was the one who invited others in, where she got to be in control. She didn’t want to be open and honest.

“Distress level,” she said.

“Ten,” he said.

Ten meant, she’d keep going.

“You’re resilient, and you’re strong, and--just let me say it--I think you’re a good person.”

She waited, to watch his reaction. His reaction was no reaction at all, not at first. Then, he tilted himself over, onto his side. He curled up again, his legs still in front of himself, shielding himself. His face was visible, but he wasn’t looking at her.

“Distress level.”

“Twenty.”

Twenty meant, she’d keep going.

“So… That’s what I think.” This was the hard part. This was the transition. She watched him, and then she kept going. “And that’s what I think about, when I think about what happened to you. What She did to you. Just listen to me, please. You know what it makes me feel, when I think about that? It makes me angry. It makes me angry, for you.”

Anger is a mask for shame, and fear, and sorrow. But it is more than that, too. It can be important, to feel anger. It is necessary, to be capable of anger. This is because anger informs us about what we need, about what is right and just. Anger lets us be strong and stand up for the disadvantaged.
Anger lets us revolt, and fight, and scream, when anything else would be a capitulation to our own mistreatment. Anger matters. It can matter, and it can be vital, absolutely vital, for a trauma survivor to be capable of accessing their anger, of feeling it, of recognizing it for what it means.

Now his eyes were on her. Now he was watching her.

“This is what I’m telling you, Crowley. I’m mad. I’m mad, at Her. I’m mad about what She’s done, about what She did, about what She did to you. She should have to beg forgiveness from you. You should get to decide whether She gets it or not. That’s what I think. Distress level.”

He was watching her, his eyes straight on her. They weren’t his angry eyes, not the eyes with all the anger she was so accustomed to have staring her down. They were bland eyes, not glazed and not vacant, but near to hollowed out. He wasn’t breathing, she was fairly certain, he wasn’t breathing.

“Crowley, distress level.”

“Keep going,” he said.

Fine. She would.

“This is why I’m not scared of being damned. She can’t damn me, Crowley. She can’t do that to me, because I won’t let Her. My choice. I made it my choice. I reject Her. I reject what She has to offer. I don’t think She deserves my love.”

She watched him. He watched her. She felt certain, and she felt sure, and it felt good to say the words, to have them heard, to have them in the air in the space between them. It felt good to be open and honest. It felt terrible, and it felt good.

This wasn’t about her, though. This wasn’t about her month with Buddhist monks. This wasn’t about her willingness to accept an afterlife of suffering. This was about him. She was being open and honest, because she was his therapist, because she thought this could be what he needed.

She watched him. She watched, as he reached a hand back, behind himself. She watched, as that hand came back to his front, pulling with it a blanket that she was fairly certain hadn’t been there before. She watched, as he pulled the blanket around himself, around his limbs and his torso, around the whole of his head. He cocooned himself, and he coiled himself up into an even smaller shape, there beneath his blanket. He hid himself, completely, but he was still there. He was still there, simply below the surface.

She couldn’t stop now. She knew what Crowley needed. At least, she thought she knew, she hoped she knew. She thought, he needed her to be open and honest.

“And,” she said.

And. She said, and. That was the word she said, she said: and.

Professional psychotherapists, like Aubrey Thyme, are trained to make use of a variety of microskills. These microskills include reflective statements, summarizing statements, open questions, non-verbal emotional reflections, and so much more. These microskills are what allow a therapist to respond and react to her client precisely as she means to, precisely as she believes that she should, for his benefit. These microskills are what make a therapist a therapist, far more than any theory, any techniques, anything else.

One of the hardest microskills for many psychotherapists to learn is to use the word and. We don’t
often like this word, not the word and. We are comfortable, in many ways, far more with its mirror reflection, the word but. We use that word, the word but, to exclude experiences, to undermine the full totality of what we feel and need. We say: I am scared, but I am strong. Or we say: I am strong, but I am scared. It puts the two claims at odds, makes us choose between them, presents them as competitors for our attention. It shields us from having to acknowledge the truth, the whole truth of both claims, both together: I am scared and I am strong.

That is the power of the word, and. It doesn’t exclude, it doesn’t minimize or enforce competition between disparate feelings or needs. The word, and, is an expression of acceptance, of commitment to the whole of truth. The word, and, can give one the power to be both open and honest.

“And,” she said, again, “it’s okay if you feel differently.”

The word and can be especially important for those who have suffered early-life trauma at the hands of a parent. The word and can be especially important for those who are or have been abused children, children of abusive parents. The word and matters, because the word but can cause so much pain. Children of abusive parents are hounded, constantly, by the word but. They are told by half the world: Sure, she’s your mother, but she was so terrible to you! They are told by the other half: Sure, she was so terrible to you, but she’s still your mother! They are put in the middle, between the two truths, and they are made to choose between them. They are made to choose: accept that she was your mother, or accept that she hurt you, but not both, not both, you must choose a side in this war between nurturance and abuse, you must choose, one or the other, you must choose.

What so many children of abusive parents need, what they truly need, is simply the word and. They need to be allowed to feel both, to recognize the truth of both. They need to be told, it’s okay if you still love the woman who hurt you. They need to be told, it’s okay if you rage against the woman who fed you and held you. They need to be told, it’s okay to feel both rage and love. What many children of abusive parents need, what so many of them truly need, is the freedom and compassion that comes from this word, that comes from the word and.

She loved you, and also she was broken and hateful. She screamed in your face, and also she sang you lullabies. She terrified you, and also she made you feel special. She was the only one who looked after you, and also she slapped you for asking for your supper. You attacked her, and also you were a child, you didn’t mean to hurt her, you were only trying to protect yourself. You were only a child, a young child, a child who was terrified and hurt, and also you will feel guilty for all the rest of your life for what you did. She packed up all her belongings in the middle of the night, and also you loved her, you loved her, you couldn’t help but love her. She abandoned you, she left you, she did the unforgivable, and also, you cried out to the empty air, you cried until bloody, you cried out and begged forgiveness for what you did, you cried that you would do anything, you would be good, you would try as hard as you could, if only she would come back, come back, please come back to me, don’t leave me all alone, I promise I’ll be good.

You’re an adult, you’re a professional, you’re in control, and also, you will not ever stop being a broken and scared little child.

That was the power of and. It was Aubrey Thyme’s job—it was her responsibility, her honor, her single chance at anything like grace—to provide the space of the word and for her clients, her clients like Crowley.

“It’s okay, Crowley,” she said. She said it softly. She was open and honest, she was finally being open and honest. She was letting him see her for who she was, and she was open and honest enough to see him for who he was, as well, as he stayed hidden and coiled up safe beneath his
blanket cocoon.

“It is completely okay, despite everything She’s done to you… It’s completely okay that you still love Her.”

She let those words hang, in the air between them. She let those words fill the whole room. She let them fill the room because, she knew, she thought, she hoped, that they were the honest truth that he needed to be allowed to hear.

She and Crowley, they hadn’t been on the same page. They would not be on the same page, not about this. He wanted Her forgiveness and love, and he would perhaps never have it. She could have Her forgiveness and love, and she would perhaps never want it. They hadn’t been on the same page, and perhaps they would never be. But they could sit, together, in compassionate honesty. They could see each other for who they really were.

The blanket quaked and writhed. The blanket sobbed. It sobbed out. The blanket curled itself up, curled itself up as tight as it could, and it sobbed.

Aubrey Thyme wiped at her eyes.

She would sit here, with Crowley. She would sit, in compassionate honesty, with him. She would sit with him, for as long as he needed, as long as it took for him to feel safe enough to emerge from his cocoon.

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“You’re shit at theology,” he said, later.

Aziraphale was still gone, so she had pulled out the deck of cards. Crowley had vetoed go fish, which wasn’t any real loss for her. They had settled on gin rummy.

“I don’t have to know anything about theology,” she said, taking her turn. “I know you.”

Chapter End Notes

Take care of yourself. Be good to yourself. If you need help, please reach out to those who are there to provide it.
Electra and Oedipus

Chapter Summary

Aubrey Thyme makes a bargain for a ride.

“You know, maybe we should spend some time talking about your interior design choices,” she said.

“No,” he said, glaring, but it was one of his more friendly glares. “No, we’re not going to do that. You don’t get to look at my things.”

“Uh-huh,” she said, looking at his things.

It was the start of day three, and Crowley had apparently decided he was ready for a change of scenery. This was a pleasant surprise, and it spoke well to his improving mental state, although she could only assume the uptick wouldn’t last the whole day. Aziraphale was gone by the time she arrived, so Crowley had opened the door when she knocked and then invited her into a different room in his flat. She wasn’t sure what to call this room. It didn’t seem right to call it an office, or a living room, or a study. And, she decided, she certainly wasn’t going to think of it as a throne room.

She wasn’t going to think of it as a throne room, even if, at the moment, Crowley was sitting in a goddamn fucking throne.

“Let’s at least address the power differential you’ve set up here,” she said.

When she had arrived, the wooden chair that had previously been stationed in his bedroom was now on the opposite side of the desk from his goddamn fucking throne. It was too short. It left her in a diminutive position as she sat in it, and it meant he towered over her. He towered over her, again, because he was sitting in none other than a goddamn fucking throne.

“If you find this uncomfortable,” he said, “then I have bad news for you about the rest of eternity.”

“If the worst that happens is I feel uncomfortable,” she said, “then I gotta say, Hell’s got a pretty great propaganda machine it’s running up here.”

“Eh,” he said, annoyed.

It was the start of day three, and she was sitting in a too-short chair across from her client in a goddamn fucking throne, with a behemoth of a desk between them. It was the start of day three, and it was time for them to negotiate. This was where he had set them up, when he had known it was time for them to negotiate.

She took the folder from her bag, and she removed the unsigned contract from the folder. She placed the paper on the surface between them.

Crowley reached out, picked it up. He looked it over, acting casual, as if it didn’t take a significant amount of effort to act casual while sitting in a goddamn fucking throne.
“Now that I think about it,” he said, and his tone had a certain droning quality to it that meant he intended to piss her off, “I shouldn’t have made such a big deal out of this, should I? Could’ve just forged your signature. Isn’t that right?”

She wasn’t going to rise to that bait. She set her expression in a way that said, *Look at how I’m not rising to that bait.*

“That’s the sort of thing we do, isn’t it, Aubrey?” he continued, his expression now setting in a way that said, *But just look at how good this bait is.*

“I’ll shred the release of information soon as I’m back home,” she negotiated.

“Naw,” he said, returning to something like a casual voice, letting the unsigned contract fall back down to the desk. He repositioned himself in his goddamn fucking throne, as if there were any chance he could actually settle into his comfortable sprawl in a seat with such an unrelentingly straight back. “Should’ve signed one ages ago, to be honest.”

“Uh-huh,” she said, and now she really did feel like rising to his bait. She wasn’t going to, though. She knew how complex Crowley’s attitude was towards the forged contract. She knew that he knew that Aziraphale was the forger, not her. She knew that he knew that she wasn’t actually the one guilty of frightening Aziraphale, even if he wouldn’t admit it. She knew he needed to be able to bait her and guilt her about the forged contract, and she knew he would need to continue doing so until he was ready to acknowledge everything he knew.

He needed her to be guilty of frightening Aziraphale, until he felt safe enough to admit that he felt guilty for frightening Aziraphale.

“Let’s start by talking about why this matters for you,” she said, tapping her finger against the unsigned contract.

“Barely even affects me,” he said, looking off to the side. “Far more to do with you, than with me.”

“You wrote it up,” she pushed. “You wanted me to sign it. You left, in the middle of a session, because I wouldn’t. And we both know I’m here now, because of this. So, talk to me about why it matters.”

“Do you really hate tea that much?” he said.

*So this is how we’re going to do it,* she thought.

Until this point, Aubrey Thyme had been very successfully ignoring the tray with a cup of tea, a bowl of sugar, and a glass full of ice that was sitting at the far side of Crowley’s desk. It had been there when she had arrived. Aziraphale hadn’t been there, but the fucking tea had been.

“It bothers you that I don’t drink it,” she said simply.

“Well, it’s just…” Crowley lolled his head against the back of his goddamn fucking throne, bringing his gaze back to her. “It’s the third time, isn’t it?”

“Day three,” she agreed.

“Three times, you’ve come into my home. Three times, Aziraphale has made you a cup of tea, because he wants you to be comfortable, because he’s trying to be hospitable. Three times, you’ve rejected him.”
She noticed his wording. He did not say she had rejected it. He did not say she had rejected the tea. He said that she had rejected him, Aziraphale. She noticed that, and she knew to be careful because of it.

“Almost feels like something symbolic, doesn’t it?” he asked, the smarmy asshole.

“I never asked for the tea,” she said, shifting in her seat so she could cross one leg over the other. “You did.”

“You know what I think?” he said, as if he hadn’t heard her. “I think, if I had made the tea, you wouldn’t be so stubborn about it.”

This was, in Aubrey Thyme’s professional opinion, getting obnoxious. She had come into this stifling, too-dark, too-walled demonic lair, and she had committed herself to accepting nothing, not a thing, not even a single aril. She had come into this space that felt like a lie, that felt like lies settled on top of deeper lies, this space filled with straight-backed goddamned fucking thrones, this space where it was so easy to see how terrified and hidden Crowley had spent literal millennia, and she had committed herself to being open and honest, truly open and honest. She had come into this space to do her job, to fulfill her professional responsibilities, to offer what care she could to her client, and to do so through the tool of open and honest interaction.

She knew that she had, quote-unquote, control issues, and she knew these control issues could get in the way of her open and honest interactions with her clients. She knew she hated how much control she had to cede in order to sit in another’s home, to do her work in a space where she didn’t make the rules, where she wasn’t the one who got to invite others in, where she didn’t have her chairs and her clock. She had enough insight to know that it made her uncomfortable when Aziraphale was hospitable, was kind, was someone who could offer to provide care when she was the one professionally situated to do the work of caring for others. She had enough insight to know, to acknowledge, to admit to herself: if Crowley had been the one who made the tea, then, sure, she would have ignored the protests from her control issues and accepted it as the act of kindness that it was. She could admit it. She would admit it. She would be open and honest.

Fuck it, she thought. She reached for the cup of tea, and she downed it like a shot.

Several different signals from Aubrey Thyme’s sensory nervous system were processed and interpreted by her central nervous system simultaneously. There were signals from the hand that had grabbed hold of the cup, signals which her brain interpreted as: Error. Stop. Re-evaluate. These signals, unfortunately, were interpreted no earlier than the signals arriving from her esophagus were interpreted: dying dying you are dying burning up burning poisoned you’ve been poisoned. There was then a quarter-second lag until signals from her mouth, her tongue, and her lips could catch up, offering a chorus: fire fire we’re on fire. Then more signals came in from her throat and the whole of her chest, signals that left her with a choking, consuming ache, a sensation of embodied horror. She was coughing and choking, and her lungs were boiling, and she had just barely enough wherewithal to look up at Crowley in her panic.

She looked at Crowley, as she coughed and choked, and she saw that he looked near horrified back at her.

“What did you do!” he cried out.

She coughed, she spluttered.

“You can’t chug tea!”
Eked from her choking throat: “Hot!”

“Of course it’s hot! It’s tea, what were you expecting?”

She coughed, and she spluttered, and now she glared. “Sitting there!” she croaked, and she then coughed some more. “At least a half hour!”

“He left hours ago, Aubrey!” He didn’t get up, he didn’t move at all, and he didn’t have the decency to hide how exasperating he was finding her to be. “You think he’d just let your tea get cold?”

She glowered, and then she glowered some more, and she kept on glowering while she tried to get her throat to stop constricting, her lungs to stop spasming.

“You alright?” he asked.

“No!” It came out as a choked-off breath, even though she had meant it to sound a lot more annoyed.

He shouldn’t have had to ask. At least he had the decency, she thought, to look like he knew he shouldn’t have had to ask. He made a wave of his hand, like a quick shoo-away of a fly, and then she felt the pain recede. She felt her system start to calm. She waited for the sense memory of the physiological panic to pass.

She took deep breaths.

What a pleasant surprise, she thought, to find herself grateful for a glass full of ice. She scooped out a cube from the glass on the tea tray and popped it in her mouth. Thank you, Aziraphale, she made herself think.

“You’re an idiot,” Crowley said. He said it, and she saw that he was starting to grin.

“Listen,” she said, around the ice, with her most powerful glare. “You can either laugh at me, or you can sit in that goddamn fucking throne, but no way am I putting up with you doing both.”

He proved her wrong: he laughed, right there, while sitting in the goddamn fucking throne. It would be a while yet until her embarrassment was soothed enough for her to stop acting annoyed, but at least she could admit that it was good to hear him laugh.

“You can’t blame Aziraphale for that,” he said.

“I know, I know. I get it.”

“You could’ve really hurt yourself, there, you know.”

“I did really hurt myself.”

“So tell me about this counter offer,” he said. He was ready to negotiate.

By the time her lunch break came around, they had a set of mutually agreeable terms and conditions drafted up. She had let him take the reins on crafting the specifics. Neither of them were lawyers, after all, but she knew his skillset was far more lawyer-adjacent than hers. And she understood that, in this situation, what mattered for Crowley was far less the actual content of the contract they ultimately worked out but instead the act of negotiating through it, together. What mattered, for Crowley, was that she was taking it seriously. What mattered was that they took each
other seriously while developing a set of ground rules for moving forward.

By the time they reached 11am, by the time she left for her lunch, she and Crowley had each picked up a pen and signed on the dotted lines.

By the time she returned from her lunch, he was back in bed. He was back in bed, and he stared with half-hollow eyes as she pulled the wooden chair back into the room. It was okay. It was okay, in Aubrey Thyme’s professional opinion, that he was back in bed, that he had crashed back down. She had expected it, and she had prepared for it, and she was here to keep him from crashing down too far.

By the time she was ready to leave that afternoon, she had at least gotten him to agree to a plan for the next day. He had agreed, he would leave his flat the next day, the fourth day. He had agreed, he would return to the hard work of taking care of himself the next day.

She and Crowley, they had reached an agreement.

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It was 4:00pm exactly, that afternoon, when Aubrey Thyme left Crowley’s flat. It was 4:02pm, that afternoon, when she ran into Aziraphale outside. He was returning, she assumed, because she was leaving.

Three times, he had made for her a cup of tea. Three times, he had offered her a gift of hospitality and kindness. And the third time, when she had accepted it, that gesture had burned her from the inside out. It had burned her from the inside out, but it hadn’t been his fault.

“Good afternoon,” she greeted him.

“Yes, it is,” he said, smiling a greeting back to her.

It was now 4:03pm, which meant that she was off the clock. She was off the clock, but this seemed like a good opportunity to fulfill a professional responsibility or two. During intensive in-home therapy, a professional like Aubrey Thyme knew she was never actually off the clock.

“How have you been holding up?” she asked. She asked while making herself attend to his face, to those expressive eyes and that smile that still could frighten her. She wanted to watch him carefully as he responded because, she knew, while he was not a liar like Crowley, he had his own distinct challenges with the truth.

“It does seem we’re on the up-and-up now, doesn’t it?” he said.

It wasn’t actually an answer to her question. She wouldn’t push him to actually answer. She wouldn’t push him to be honest. He wasn’t her client, after all.

Sometimes, when Aubrey Thyme interacted with someone who was not her client, she let her mind drift to imagining what it would be like to work with them. Aziraphale, she understood, would have been a challenging client for her. It would have been hard for her to gain his trust, although in an entirely different way from how it had been hard for her to gain Crowley’s. Working with Aziraphale would have challenged her to be a better therapist, a better person. She knew, working with Aziraphale would have forced her to acknowledge how brittle her patience could be, how pushy she could be, how she often didn’t like it when people were nice to her.

She would have tried, though. She would have tried, and, she thought, she likely would have failed.
Aubrey Thyme had accepted a gift of kindness from Aziraphale, and it had burned her from the inside out. She wasn’t the sort of person who could help him. She wasn’t right for him. She looked at him, and she assessed him, and she had to admit that she was not at all the type of person who could meet his therapeutic needs.

She wondered. She observed and assessed, and she extrapolated. Aziraphale, she thought, would do best with someone older, someone male, someone who exuded a comfortable, paternal masculinity. He would do best with someone who had a non-directive and welcoming therapeutic approach, who could smile bright and happy. He would do best with someone who could support and encourage him to lean into his joie de vivre in every way that Aubrey Thyme, herself, found cloying and awkward. He needed…

Well, shit, she thought.

In retrospect, it was really fucking obvious.

Dave had a background in music therapy. She knew this, because he still incorporated drum work into his practice. He loved his bongos, even if no one who had to walk down the hall outside his office did. Dave had a background in music therapy, and he was an older male, and he had a bright, open smile that he obviously hoped was completely infectious.

Aubrey Thyme thought of this, and she allowed herself to develop a string of imagined perceptions, a full account of what she believed could be possible. She imagined Aziraphale, hesitant and unassuming as always, walking into Dave’s office. She imagined Dave giving him that horrible, open smile, and Aziraphale responding to it the way Aubrey Thyme never, ever would: that smile actually would be completely infectious, for Aziraphale. Dave’s kindness, his warmth, his masculinity, his absolutely fucking annoying love of the bongo, all of it: it would help Aziraphale feel at ease, it would let him settle, it would give him the opportunity to practice feeling at peace with himself.

She imagined the first time Dave would hold out a small bongo drum, and she imagined Aziraphale demurring. I couldn’t possibly, she imagined Aziraphale saying, and she imagined Dave accepting it. Dave would accept it, at first, because he wasn’t pushy. He would accept it, and he wouldn’t push, but he would just make sure the offer was always on the table. Dave would wait, until Aziraphale was ready. And when Aziraphale was ready, Aubrey Thyme imagined, he would reach out and take hold of the drum with his hesitant, careful hands. She imagined him tapping at the drum, ever so lightly at first, terrified that he was filling the air even with those small sounds. She imagined him growing more confident, working to find a rhythm, learning what it feels like to be safe even when loud, joyously loud.

She could imagine Aziraphale going too far. She could imagine the bongo cracking and splintering in Aziraphale’s hands. She could imagine the stricken look of horror on his face, and then the warm flood of relief he would experience when Dave just laughed and laughed. She could imagine the bongo being healed. She could imagine Aziraphale healing.

She imagined all of this. She imagined it all, and it all felt right, it all felt good, it felt like a future that was worth encouraging into being.

“You know…” She paused, and she worked out how she wanted to say this. “I could get you a referral, if you’d think it would be helpful.”

“A referral?”

“Another therapist. Someone you could talk to. Someone who could help you with—” thousands of
years of repression and fear “--working through everything that’s happened.”

“Hm,” he said. He said it, not like he was considering it, but instead like he would perhaps put aside a bit of time a few weeks from now when he would consider considering it.

“Let me give you a card,” she said. She still had a few of them in her wallet, leftovers from when she handed them out to her clients. She fished one out, held it out for him. “He met once with Crowley, actually, but I don’t think that’ll be a problem.”

“Is that so?” Aziraphale still sounded uncommitted. He looked at the card in her outstretched hand, and then, after thinking it through, he took it from her.

“You’d like him,” she said, and she was certain it was true. She was certain. She couldn’t imagine a world where Aziraphale wouldn’t like Dave.

“Well, thank you,” he said, and he offered her a gracious smile. He thanked her, and he smiled. The way he did it, it made her think of how she had thanked him and smiled, that first day, when he had first offered her tea which she had refused to drink.

Professional psychotherapists, like Aubrey Thyme, are accustomed to frustration. Their work can be extremely frustrating. It is often so mind-numbingly obvious what a client needs to do, but you can’t just tell him what to do. Advice backfires. If a client actually could follow the mind-numbingly obvious advice you could give him, then he wouldn’t need therapy in the first place. So, the therapist’s job is to sit, to nod, to help him learn how to follow his own advice, even as she hears the voice screaming in the back of her head, Just do the obvious thing, just do it, it’s so obvious what you need to do! It can be frustrating, deeply frustrating, to know exactly what someone needs while also knowing that no good can come from saying so.

Many of Aubrey Thyme’s colleagues, she knew, relied on an aphorism to help them accept and overcome this frustration. What they said was: all we can ever do is plant the seed. This was how many of Aubrey Thyme’s colleagues understood themselves. They understood themselves to be the planters of seeds. They could do nothing else: they could plant the seed, but it was the tree that had to do the hard work of growing.

Aubrey Thyme, right now, had to admit that she had attempted to plant a seed, that all she could do was plant it. She had given Aziraphale Dave’s card, because that was all she could do. She couldn’t make him call. She couldn’t force him to be ready to make that call. She could plant the seed, and Aziraphale would have to be the one to allow it to grow.

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“Makes me feel like a bloody cabbie,” he muttered.

“Seems appropriate,” she said, not looking up from her notebook. “You drive like one, anyway.”

“You know, you’d be a real pain in the arse for any demon set to torment you,” he said. “You don’t scare.”

“That’s not true,” she said, feeling lazy. “I’m sure you could scare me if you really tried.”

She wasn’t taking notes in her notebook. She wanted it to look like she was taking notes, but there wasn’t anything going on that was actually worth taking notes about. Instead, she was doodling. She was sitting in the backseat of Crowley’s car, and she was doodling in a notebook, while he was tasked with simply driving and saying whatever came to mind.
There was no way Aubrey Thyme was going to sit in the passenger seat in Crowley’s car. She was smarter than that. It only made sense that the passenger seat in Crowley’s car was, in fact, Aziraphale’s seat, and there was no way she was going to sit in Aziraphale’s seat in Crowley’s car. So, instead, she sat in the back. She sat in the back, and she doodled, and he drove.

“Aziraphale doesn’t like my driving,” he said.

“Can’t say I’m surprised by that,” she said. Aziraphale, in Aubrey Thyme’s professional opinion, was a worrywort.

“He said-- He says--” Crowley started, and then he stopped. She glanced up enough to see how his jaw flexed, before he continued. “He doesn’t like how I speed.”

“Makes sense,” she said.

This was why Aubrey Thyme had decided they would spend the day with Crowley driving her around in his car. This was why Aubrey Thyme had decided that this day, their fourth day, would be a day in which they got out of Crowley’s flat, away from his goddamn fucking throne and the whole persona that space was intended to reinforce. This was why Aubrey Thyme had decided that this day, their fourth day, would be Free Association Day.

Freud was perhaps most famous for his completely unapologetic obsession with penises and mothers. He was also famous for plenty else, though. In particular, he was famous for using the method of free association, or the method by which a client was prompted to say whatever the hell came to mind. This was the classic image of psychoanalysis, as Freud practiced it, after all: the client spread out on a couch, the therapist sitting slightly behind and to the side, the client speaking at length without interruption, the therapist taking careful notes.

Freud had practiced free association because he believed it could give him access to whatever lurked within the deepest depths of the id. He actually would take notes, when his clients spoke, and he would analyze every single thing they said to the point of inanity, seeking out the hidden meanings the client himself could not recognize. Freud would let the client speak at length, uninterrupted, and then he’d tell the client that what he had said, while free associating, meant he actually wanted to have sex with his mother.

With Freud, it always came back to penises and mothers.

Aubrey Thyme did not believe in the id. She did not believe in the deep dark depths of the subconscious as some uncontrollable, unbiddable, biological force. She did believe in subconscious processes, of course; she just didn’t believe that there was any place on the map of the human mind where the best you could do is mark an X and say, here there be monsters.

This didn’t mean that free association had no value, for a psychotherapist like Aubrey Thyme. She thought of it like training wheels, of a sort. She thought of it like a sort of training wheels for the open and free discourse that Crowley clearly needed to learn. Free association is, after all, free. Free association could, she hypothesized, help him get used to the idea of talking to her, openly and honestly, without censoring himself. Without censoring himself, the way he very clearly just had.

“So, where should we go?” he asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” she said. “We’re just going to drive and talk. Just, probably shouldn’t drive to the bookshop.”

“I go to the bookshop all the time,” he said, like he thought she was coddling him.
“You do,” she agreed, because she was in fact coddling him. “But you don’t go to the bookshop with me in your car all the time. If you’re up to it, we’ll try that tomorrow. But, for now, let’s just leave that aside.”

He made a nod of acquiescence, and then he made a U-turn.

For the process of free association, the therapist should primarily remain silent. The therapist should allow herself to drift into the background so that the client is as free from distractions as possible. Additionally, for the process of free association, the client is expected to be in a quiet and peaceful room, rather than driving through the hectic and crowded streets of London. But Aubrey Thyme made allowances for Crowley’s distinct nature and needs. If she didn’t respond to what he said, at least a bit, then he would grow suspicious that she was doing something Freudian. If she had him try to free associate in a quiet and peaceful room, she knew, he would grow fidgety and restless. It wouldn’t have worked.

So, here they were. He could go as fast as he wanted, he could let the process of driving keep him from growing restless, he could let the speed and the free choice of where to drive help shake at the depression that still lingered on him, and she could pretend to be quiet primarily because she was busy taking notes.

So far, this morning, she had learned that Crowley had a lot to say about marsupials. That was fine. Free association was supposed to be free, and they had plenty of time.

“You ever watch *Planet Earth*?” he asked.

“Parts of it,” she said.

“Did you see the bit with the snow monkeys?”

Ah. So, now, they were off marsupials and on to snow monkeys.

Aubrey Thyme doodled by drawing lines. She tried to draw straight lines. Straight, vertical, parallel lines, drawn between the spaced out lines on the paper, as precise as she could make them. It wasn’t easy, not while sitting in the back seat of a bumpy car. That was part of the challenge. That was the point: to get the lines as perfect as possible, despite her circumstances.

“Creepy little hands, is all,” he said.

She hadn’t quite caught everything he had said about snow monkeys. She could agree, though: they had creepy little hands.

“Made in Her image, huh,” she said, to which Crowley responded with a variety of annoyed mutterings.

Once she had a full row of straight, vertical lines, she would then switch to drawing precisely straight, horizontal lines, connecting together the vertical lines she had drawn. It was easier to keep these straight because they were shorter, but it was much harder to keep them perfectly spaced out, evenly distributed between the vertical lines.

She was just about to finish a set of horizontal lines, when she noted that Crowley had been silent for a bit. She didn’t look up from her doodles, but she recentered her attention on him.

“Maybe I should apologize,” he said.

He said it low. He said it quiet. He said it like the scared and abandoned child she had always seen
him as. He said it like he was frightened someone might hear him. He said it like he was frightened he might hear himself.

This wasn’t about snow monkeys. Her mind had drifted, just a bit, with her doodling, but she was certain he hadn’t been talking about anything other than snow monkeys for a while. He had allowed his mind to drift, in that momentary silence, and now he was on something else. He was considering whether to apologize, which of course left him frightened and nervous, but she had no clue about what or to whom he was considering.

She couldn’t just come out and say she didn’t know what he was talking about. He would use that as an excuse to be distracted. He would start whining at her, complaining about everything. She also couldn’t just say nothing, though, because she was fairly certain his brain would quickly return him to less terrifying topics if he received no prompting.

“Tell me about that,” she said. The oldest stand-by in the therapist’s book, that is.

“I could try it, at least.” He didn’t seem sure.

“You could try to apologize?”

“Never could have, before.” She glanced up at him, and she could see how his hands were gripping at the steering wheel. His fingers gripped at it, and then released, hovered just over it, and then gripped at it again. “Couldn’t even consider it, before. Wasn’t an option.”

Aubrey Thyme watched him carefully. She watched him carefully, as his hands gripped and released at the steering wheel. She watched him carefully, because she thought she was starting to understand what he was talking about, but she was going to be careful that she wasn’t wrong.

“What would it mean for you,” she said, soft, hopefully unobtrusive, “if you were to apologize?”

His hands gripped and released at the steering wheel, gripped and released.

“Nothing,” he said, and bitterness crept into his voice. His hands gripped and released, and she could see how his jaw was working, how his face couldn’t decide whether to sneer or do something else. He was angry, and he was depressed, and he desperately wanted to bargain for forgiveness with Someone who was never willing to negotiate. He was feeling all of it, all of it at once, because these sorts of feelings always come together, always come packaged together.

“Nothing,” she repeated after him.

“She doesn’t listen,” he said. “She never listens. Never. Could scream until I discorporated, and She wouldn’t listen.”

He needed to scream, she thought. She had never heard him scream, not really scream, and she thought that he could use it.

“Why don’t you pull over,” she offered, still quiet, still soothing, but also noticing how the car was starting to drift into an oncoming lane.

He pulled over. He stopped driving, but his hands remained on the steering wheel, and the car did not turn off.

“You can’t force someone to accept an apology,” she said, after a moment. “You can’t make someone listen, even if you know they should. Which is why the real question is, what would it mean for you, if you were to do it.”
He sighed. His hands fell into his lap. He looked out his side window, and then he leaned forward to rest his head against the steering wheel. He needed to scream, and he needed to cry. He still, so much, needed to cry.

“It would have to be something you did, for you,” she went on. “It would have to be something that was meaningful and important for you, even if you don’t get a response.”

She could let those words hang in the air, for as long as he needed them. She could wait, in the back seat of his car, while he took as much time as he needed, as he found all the ways in which he still needed to cry and scream.

“I didn’t mean to fall,” he said.

He said it, as he had said it before, as she had heard him say it before, as She had apparently never cared enough to hear him say it before.

Aubrey Thyme did not know why Crowley had fallen. She knew what he had said about it, in the past, but she did not know what had actually happened. He had made allusions here and there. He had offered half-explanations now and then. But they never lined up. They didn’t fit together. His story changed each time. It made him sound like a liar, but she knew better than that. She knew Crowley better than that. Crowley’s story didn’t change because he was a liar, not because he was trying to deceive her. It changed, instead, because he didn’t actually know why he fell. He didn’t know. His story changed because he couldn’t understand it, because he had only fragments of an understanding, and he didn’t know how to piece them together, himself. His story changed because She had never gone to the effort of explaining it to him.

His story changed, she knew, because he hadn’t even known that falling was an option before it had happened. His story changed, because he had been surprised by it, because there had been no warning, because She had made no effort to set up clear boundaries beforehand. Crowley’s story changed, because She had never specified what the ground rules were. She had never set out a contract, clarified the terms and conditions, ensured sufficient precision so that there could be no misunderstandings for any of the parties involved. She had never taken the time to ensure She had his informed consent.

There were some things, in Aubrey Thyme’s opinion, that were simply unforgivable.

“I’m so sorry, Crowley,” Aubrey Thyme said. She said it because he deserved to hear it. He deserved to hear someone say it. “I’m so sorry about what happened to you.”

A trauma specialist, like Aubrey Thyme, is always, at the same time, a grief counselor. This is because a trauma response is, always, at the same time, a grief response. There is grief in the experience of trauma. There is grief in the experience of being changed, terribly, and finding that you cannot inhabit the world as you previously had. There is grief in the experience of trauma, and Crowley would not be the first trauma survivor to think of his experience as a fall from grace. A trauma specialist, like Aubrey Thyme, is always, at the same time, a grief counselor, because there is grief to feel in the wake of terror and tragedy.

The Kübler-Ross model, which holds that there are five distinct stages of grief, is by far the most famous theory of grief. It is a useful model, in some ways. It has its value, Aubrey Thyme well knew, for conceptualizing the emotions involved in experiencing grief. But, despite its uses, the Kübler-Ross model of grief had its limitations. Aubrey Thyme, for her part, much preferred an alternative model of grief, a model that understood grief as a process containing separate tasks. According to this model, there are four tasks to be completed as part of grief: acknowledging the reality of the loss, experiencing the pain associated with the loss, adjusting to life with the loss,
and, finally, finding a meaningful way forward with one’s life.

This model of grief has not seen much alteration since it was first proposed. It has not seen much alteration, except for the final task. As it was originally proposed, the final task required returning to the world and treating it as if it were brand new, as if it were wholly separate from the world that had existed before the loss had occurred. As originally proposed, the final task of grief was to completely give up on the memory of what had been lost and create, as if from whole cloth, a new understanding of how one’s position in the world could be meaningful.

It was this last task that had been revised.

This last task had been revised, because you cannot actually design the world anew. You cannot actually create a new life for oneself, as if from whole cloth, as if the loss had never occurred. You are stuck with the world you have, the world in which bad things happen, the world in which trauma occurs and the reality of the loss never fully leaves you. And so, in the revised version of the four tasks of grieving, the final task is put like this: the task is to develop an enduring connection to what has been lost while also accepting the possibilities for a new life moving forward. It is the task of finding meaning in the loss itself, and having that meaning help guide one through the challenging task of living well.

Trauma survivors often find themselves stuck in an in-between space, an uncomfortable gap between what was and what now is. Trauma survivors want to return to the old world, to the world they had lived in before the trauma. They want to return to that feeling of innocence and safety, that feeling of naivete, before they learned just how cruel and senseless this world could be. Trauma survivors, often, also want to shed that old world like dead skin, to reject it and move on from it, to create for themselves some brand new life, some thoroughly new world completely divorced from the one they previously knew.

They can’t. They can’t do either. You can’t return to the world that was, but you also can’t create the world anew. You can’t ignore the reality of what happened, of what you lost, of how much you care about what was lost. You can’t. This final task of grieving, this fourth task of locating a meaningful path forward, requires that path to stay within that in-between space, that space in which memories of what was can be wedded to hopes and dreams for the future. It requires learning how to be comfortable with both what was and what can be, rejecting neither but accepting both. It is only in that in-between space, between the world that was lost and the dream of a world created wholly anew, that trauma survivors can come to accept their feelings of grief.

It was Aubrey Thyme’s fourth day of intensive in-home therapy with Crowley, and he was working hard. He was working so very hard. He was angry, and he was depressed, and he wanted desperately to be able to bargain with Someone who never negotiates. He was working so very hard to acknowledge his grief, to feel it, to live with it. He was working so very hard, and the hardest task is always finding a path that can lead to acceptance.

“It’s not like I actually wanted to stay in Heaven,” he said, after a while, once he was ready to start wiping at his eyes, once he wanted to get driving again.

“You didn’t want to fall, and you wouldn’t have wanted to stay up there anyway.”

“You don’t know what it’s like up there.”

“No,” she said. She returned to her doodling, to her vertical and horizontal lines, to the parallel and perpendicular lines she challenged herself to keep as perfectly straight as she could. “No, I can’t even imagine.”
For the fifth day, they returned to the car. Its backseat wasn’t really comfortable, but it was better than the wooden chair in his flat, at least.

“So, to the bookshop today,” he said.

“If you’re up for it,” she said. She had her notebook again, but she was actually going to take notes this time.

“And you want me to take the same route as I did the day of,” he guessed.

“If you’re up for it,” she repeated.

“Want me to narrate, too? What was happening day of?”

“If you’re--”

“I get it,” he cut her off. “If I’m up for it.”

She smiled. “And I’m going to keep checking in with you. If you get above thirty, we’re going to pull over and wait until you’re back down to zero.”

He groaned.

She chuckled. “I know. It’s going to be slow, and it’s going to be grueling, and we’re both going to hate it.”

“Well, when you put it that way…”

They got to work.

He made it. They made it. He made it to the bookshop. He made it to the bookshop, and he went inside, and Aziraphale was there, because of course Aziraphale would be there, would always be there. Crowley needed the opportunity to appreciate on a neurological level that, one exceptional case aside, Aziraphale would always be there.

Aubrey Thyme stayed in the car while Crowley went inside. She didn’t want to go in. She had been burned from the inside out by the act of kindness provided by that bookshop’s proprietor, and she had to admit it was all her fault. It had been all her fault.

Besides, she had to assume that Aziraphale didn’t want a human like her in his shop, anyway. It was better for her to wait outside.

Crowley came back to the car, and they did it again. They drove, again, from his flat to the bookshop, stopping whenever he had to, going as slowly as he needed to. And then they did it again. And again. They kept doing it, over and over, the whole morning, and then the whole afternoon.

They kept doing it, and by the end of the day, Crowley made it the entire drive without having to stop even once.

She was so proud of him. She was so very proud of the hard work that he put into it. She was so proud of how very committed he had been, over the past five days, despite how easy it would have
been to just give in entirely to despair. She was so very proud, because he was committed, because he had agreed to her counter offer, because they had gotten back to work, and he had worked so very hard.

Aubrey Thyme was so proud of him, because he deserved it.

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The sixth day was her final day. The sixth day was the final day until she got to go back home. The sixth day, she had long ago decided, was the day they would go to a garden centre.

She and her client stood, side by side, looking out at a remarkable variety of plants for sale, as they were completely ignored by all the employees and other customers.

“Let me guess,” he said, arms crossed in front of himself, putting on an air of disgruntlement. “You want me to pick a plant, and you want me to be nice to it.”

“Oh, Crowley. Oh no.” She cackled. She literally cackled. She turned to face him, after she cackled, and she gave him a very wide, toothy grin. “No, Bud. Oh, I’m sorry, but it is going to be so much worse than that.”

He muttered, “Don’t call me Bud.”

She would decide, later, whether she wanted to annoy him by continuing to call him Bud. Right now, she already had far more than a sufficient plan to torture him.

“You’re right that I want you to pick out a plant,” she said, still grinning, still acknowledging to herself how much of a son of a bitch she could be. “But what I want is for you to pick out a plant, and then I want you to love it.”

He made exactly the sort of sound she had expected him to make. She cackled again.

“Like I said, sorry about that.” She wasn’t sorry about it.

“I’m not capable of love,” he grumbled.

“Huh. Try again.”

“I don’t do love,” he grumbled.

“Once more, try again once more.”

He grit his teeth. He knew she wanted him to be open and honest. She knew that he was trying, that he had been trying, that he would continue to try to find a way to be open and honest. She and Crowley, she thought, they were going to make it to being open and honest with each other, even if it took commitment and time.

“If I try, then I’m just going to fail,” he said, sounding out the words carefully through his gritted teeth.

Bingo, she thought. She nodded. She gave up her toothy grin and let her expression settle into a compassionate and open smile. She understood.

“Listen, Crowley,” she said. It was a start. “Just… Listen.”

Aubrey Thyme waited for him to indicate that he was listening, which he did with a very subtle
gesture from his hand while his arms were still crossed around his front. Once she saw the gesture, she went on with saying what she wanted him to hear.

“Love isn’t a state of being. It’s not something you are or aren’t. It’s not a thing. You don’t have love or not have it. And it’s not something that can be bestowed on you. And it’s not something that can be stolen from you, either.”

Aubrey Thyme did not enjoy talking about love. Aubrey Thyme felt like a hack, saying anything that started with Love is… Aubrey Thyme would prefer it if she could never talk about love, ever, with no one. But she was a professional, and she knew her job, and she cared about her client, and she wouldn’t let her personal hang-ups get in the way of her client’s best interest.

“What love really is,” she continued, after checking that he was still listening, “is an activity. You’re right, it’s something you do, not something you are. But also, it’s a skill. Like any other skill, it’s something you can either be good at, or bad at, or somewhere in between. And, like any other skill, it’s something you can improve by practicing.”

She waited again. She looked at him. He was wearing his sunglasses, of course, because they were out in public, but she could see that he was thinking. She could see that he was listening. She and Crowley, they had finally gotten to a point, she thought, where they could listen to each other.

“So, you’re going to get a plant. And, hopefully, you pick one that reminds you of yourself. Get a plant that you think looks like you, maybe a version of you from some point in the past, in some sort of symbolic way. And, you’re going to practice with the plant. You’re going to practice loving it, so you can beef up that skill as much as you can. And, hopefully, with enough practice, there’ll come a time when you won’t need the plant anymore, and you’ll be able to apply that skill to yourself a little more successfully.”

Fucking cheesy, talking about love. Awkward. The worst part of Aubrey Thyme’s job, she thought, was having to say anything that started with Love is…

Crowley was very still now. He was looking out, straight ahead, and he was very still. He was breathing, though. He was taking long, slow breaths.

“What if I kill it?” he asked.

“You won’t,” she said. She said it, and she meant it. “Trust me.”

He took a very long, a very slow breath, and then he shook his head, and he was muttering again. He muttered: “Just listen to yourself.”

Aubrey Thyme’s eyes rolled before she had a chance to control them. She had forced herself to go out onto that really cheesy, awkward limb of talking about what love is… And what she had gotten in response, she thought, was nothing but derision.

“I get it, okay?” she grumbled. “It’s impossible to talk about this sort of thing without it sounding stupid and sappy. But that doesn’t mean—”

“Oh, shut up,” he said, to get her to shut up. It worked: she shut up. He lowered his arms from his front, shoved his hands into his pockets. “I didn’t mean it like that. I meant, literally, listen to yourself.”

Aubrey Thyme had shutted up.

“You know, every time I went in the bookshop yesterday, Aziraphale wanted me to go back out
and tempt you to come in?”

Aubrey Thyme remained shutted up.

“I told him you’d rather gouge your eyes out, but he didn’t believe me. He still wants you to come over, before you leave. He wants to show you his books.”

Three days earlier, Aubrey Thyme had been burned from the inside out by a gift of kindness provided by that bookshop proprietor, and it hadn’t been his fault. It had been her fault, entirely her fault. She wasn’t the right sort of therapist for him, and Aubrey Thyme did not know how to manage people she was not positioned to help.

“So, I’m telling you, Herb, listen to yourself. Huh?”

They stood, side by side, in a garden centre, being ignored by all the employees and every other customer. They stood, and they looked out in front of themselves, at a whole world’s worth of different kinds of plants.

“You stop by the bookshop this evening, and you let Aziraphale serve you a bottle of root beer, and I’ll pick out a plant,” he said. He negotiated. Crowley was always open to negotiating.

“I don’t like root beer,” she said.

“Good, means you have some sense.” He turned his head just a little, and he gave her a smirk. “Do we have a deal?”

“Okay,” she said. She nodded. They were agreed, even if her stomach clenched from apprehension. “Fine.”

They both took their time, standing there. They weren’t in a rush. They could let themselves just stand for a moment, side by side, as they thought about the work there still was for them to do.

“Let me make something perfectly clear, though,” she said, with a tone he would be able to recognize. “You take a single step over towards the herb section, and I’m out of here.”

He snorted out a laugh.

“I mean it,” she went on. She grinned now. “I’ll go out, and I’ll get an actual cab, and I’ll go straight to Heathrow, right now, and wait for my flight tomorrow.”

“I get it, I get it,” he said.

He ended up with a small specimen, something called a zebra haworthia. It was a succulent, and it had striped, spiky, thick leaves. The specimen he selected hadn’t been treated very well. It didn’t look like it was intended for the sort of climate London had, and it looked more like half a plant than a whole one. Some of its spiky leaves had been broken or cut off at some point in the past. The remaining stumps looked like wounds that had not been allowed to heal properly.

He selected this plant, and he held it in his hands.

“Does it have a name?” she asked. She wasn’t joking.

“No,” he said. He wasn’t joking. He was looking at it, and he was looking at how it had been broken. “No, it doesn’t get to have a name.”

She and Crowley, perhaps they could understand one another.
“Maybe it didn’t get to have a name, but it can. When it’s ready,” she said. She reassured. She smiled for him. “It might not have one right now, but you’ll come up with a good one for it.”

He didn’t seem to believe her. Love is a skill, and skills take time to develop.

“You’re good with names,” she said.

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She was off the clock at 4pm that night, and she was at the bookshop by 5pm. She didn’t want to go inside, but she did. She didn’t want to have to look Aziraphale in the face that tell him she didn’t want the root beer he had tracked down special for her, but she did. She did it, and he didn’t respond by getting hurt or offended. He just wanted to be hospitable, he was just trying to be kind to her. He was happy to hear that she would accept plain tonic water (with ice, yes, please, what was with this fucking island and its inexplicable shortage on ice?). He was happy to hold the glass of tonic water out to her so that she could take it.

She had, somehow, managed to make him happy. She had done that, just by accepting his gift of kindness. He was, after all, the kindest man she had ever laid eyes on.

He was the kindest man she had ever laid eyes on, and he laughed until his eyes welled up with tears when Crowley narced on her about the tea. *Fucking sons of a bitch, both of them,* she thought, and then she thought maybe Aziraphale wasn’t so bad after all.

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Aubrey Thyme fell asleep before her plane even took off, and she didn’t wake up until it landed.
Aubrey Thyme and Crowley set about finishing what they started.

Aubrey Thyme opened the door to her office to see an angel and a demon sitting in her waiting area, with a zebra hawhatsitcalled placed on the coffee table before them.

It was a peaceful tableau.

Aziraphale was sitting with a book in his lap, his head bent so that he could read it. Crowley was curled up in the next seat, leaning against Aziraphale’s side, looking completely dead to the world. Bud, for her part, was looking just fine. She had a new pot: it was a stripey pattern of grays and muted reds, reminiscent of some kind of textile.

Bud’s name--and gender--had been a bit of a surprise, when Crowley first brought them up. Aubrey Thyme was unsure whether to take the name as a great honor or a subtle jab. On one hand, it could have been Crowley’s way of letting her name the plant, letting her be the one to bestow upon it an identity. If that were the case, then she knew it was a deeply meaningful representation of how strong their therapeutic alliance had become. Alternatively, it could have just been his way of ensuring that she couldn’t annoy him by calling him Bud anymore. Either way, Bud was Bud.

Neither Aziraphale nor Crowley (nor, she supposed, Bud) had moved when she opened the door. Aubrey Thyme was deliberating about how best to wake Crowley up when he proved he was not actually sleeping in the first place.

“You know what she told me once?” Crowley asked. At first, Aubrey Thyme thought that he sounded groggy, but then she realized he simply sounded relaxed. He lifted a hand lazily in the air, waving it enough in Aziraphale’s face to get his attention. He was, very clearly, talking to Aziraphale and not her.

“What’s that?” Aziraphale responded.

“She told me…” Crowley went on, sounding droll, neither of them apparently having any compunction about talking about her as she stood right there in front of them. “If she’d been there, back then, in the garden? She’d have blown up the wall.”

“Ha!” Aziraphale scoffed. “Should have liked to see her try!” He looked up to settle a grin on her, and she’d be damned if his eyes didn’t literally twinkle with amusement.

Crowley, you asshole, she thought. She opened her mouth to speak, but she didn’t manage it quickly enough.

“Exactly what I said,” Crowley said, nodding with satisfaction. “Also, no dynamite.”

“Hold on.” Aziraphale furrowed his brow, turned to look at Crowley. “And just what would you have done with dynamite?”

“What do you think I’d have done with dynamite? Same thing anyone does with dynamite.”
“But, Crowley.” Aziraphale sounded a bit put out. “You didn’t have hands.”

“Didn’t have hands? Of course I have hands!” Now it was Crowley’s turn to sound put out. He waved both of his hands around, flexing his fingers, as if to say, just look at these buggers. “Had hands.”

“Oh, please. I remember how you slithered about--”

“You think just because you didn’t see them, I didn’t have them?”

“What would you have done, held the dynamite in your mouth?”

“All this time, have you really been thinking I didn’t have hands until you happened to see me with them?”

“Likely to get a fang in it, and then what would’ve happened?”

“How do you think you end up getting called something like Crawley if you don’t have hands?”

“Well--feet!”

“Feet?”

“Merely answering as a hypothetical, of course, because we’ve already established--”

“You calling me some sort of millipede?”

“I did nothing of the sort! I was simply saying--”

“Guys!” Aubrey Thyme cut in, voice raised enough to draw their attention. Both of their heads turned to acknowledge her. Thank Someone, she thought.

“Clock’s ticking,” she said.

Crowley grumbled under his breath, and she assumed he was still on the topic of hands, millipedes, and the origins of the Earth. But he also started to rearrange himself, to stand up.

“I’ll be here when you’re through, dear boy,” Aziraphale said. His tone was suddenly much softer. He had his thumb holding his spot in his book, but Crowley had his full attention. Aubrey Thyme saw that: just how fully Crowley had his attention.

Crowley, for his part, responded with another grumble--it was an affectionate grumble, she could tell, and she wondered how much more openly affectionate his response would have been, if she had not been present. He picked up Bud, gave Aziraphale a pat on the shoulder, and then made his way into her office.

It had been a peaceful tableau. In many ways, Aubrey Thyme thought as she closed her door and prepared to get to work, it had been an absolutely perfect tableau.

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Crowley sprawled out in his chair, his legs outstretched as if he were trying to be horizontal. Bud was on the end table, the sunglasses folded up beside her. Crowley rarely wore his sunglasses in session anymore.

“So, how’s your tree?” Crowley asked.
He wasn’t doing the thing. He didn’t have to do the thing anymore. They were both past the thing. They had a contract, a mutual agreement, a commitment to being open and honest.

“Looks fine, I guess,” Aubrey Thyme answered, turning her attention over to the tree. It didn’t look perfectly fine, but it was getting better. It didn’t have any dead leaves anymore, so that was something. It and Bud were both in the long process of healing. Unlike Bud, though, her tree didn’t have a name. Giving names to plants just wasn’t her. “Are you planning on asking about it every week from now on?”

There had been a time, in the past, when she would have asked that question because she was pissed off. There had been a time, in the past, when she would have rankled at the idea, when she would have snarled at him for bringing it up. There had been a time, in the past, when Aubrey Thyme had hated that tree. But she couldn’t afford to hate it anymore. She couldn’t afford to hate something that so easily symbolized so much for the both of them.

He shrugged. “You can ask for help if you need it, you know.”

There had been a time, in the past, when she would have gotten pissed off, would have rankled and snarled. But not anymore.

“I know,” she said. She smiled. She smiled, and she meant it. “Thank you. I probably will need some help with it at some point. I don’t know the first thing about plant care.”

He opened his mouth, as if he had a response right on the tip of his tongue and then had reconsidered it at the last moment. Then he said, with the sort of tone that made clear just what sort of snarky assholery he had originally intended to let out, “Yes. Yes, Herb, I think that’s been made abundantly clear by this point.”

“Oh, shut up” she said, feeling friendly, feeling relaxed, feeling free. “Come on, we’ve got work to do.”

“That we do,” he agreed. And so they got to it.

***

The tri-phasic model of trauma therapy does not provide a precise timeline for each of the different phases. This is because each client has his own needs, and the length of each phase must be determined by those needs. There are, however, some specific therapeutic programs, designed with the tri-phasic model as their fundamental backbone, that offer suggestions for a timeline. Some of these programs, such as the one intended primarily for children and adolescents but which Aubrey Thyme had modified for use with Crowley, suggested that the whole therapeutic project could be completed, at least sometimes, in as few as eight sessions.

With Crowley as the client, that was a laugh. That really, really was a laugh.

Aubrey Thyme could admit that they were both very fortunate that Crowley paid in cash. If he had relied on medical insurance, the way that so many Americans did, then she would have found herself audited by his insurance company ages ago. They would have demanded to look over her case notes so they could decide whether her work with Crowley had all been therapeutically appropriate, given just how many sessions it had all taken up until this point. She would have been threatened with her payments getting cut off, and she might even find herself having to return payments for past sessions, if she had been found in any way wanting.

Of course, Aubrey Thyme would have had far more pressing concerns than her paycheck, if she
ever had to show Crowley’s case notes to anyone. It was very fortunate, really, that he always paid in cash.

The point remained: she and Crowley had been working for a very long time, compared to the standard for this sort of treatment plan. Their therapeutic work had been disrupted and derailed in ways she never before would have thought possible. She was responsible, in part, for how slow progress had been. She was responsible, in part, for the fact that they had been working for so long since entering the second phase of therapy that she couldn’t even remember the last time she had referred to the tri-phasic model of trauma in any of her case notes. Several times over, they had come perilously close to completely losing the plot.

Demonology-informed trauma therapy, it turned out, was complicated.

She recognized, however, that she was also responsible, in part, for the fact that they had finally done it. They had a finished book—or, at least, a book that was as finished as it was going to get. It had taken a more convoluted route to get here than she ever would have imagined beforehand, but finally they had it. *Finally.*

She held it out for him to take it. It was just note paper that had been stapled along the side. It wasn’t, after all, really a book. It had always, always, just been a conceit to get him through the second phase of their work together.

He reached out to accept it from her, but she didn’t let go.

“I am begging you,” she said, her voice only half-jokingly threatening, “to please not rip it up.”

He huffed, annoyed. But that wasn’t an answer, and she wasn’t giving it over until he gave an answer. He still had difficulty accepting a product of his own efforts that was neither intentionally half-assed nor completely perfect. He still hated the book, she knew, and he had tried to rip it up before.

“Fine,” he said. That was good enough for her, so she let him take it.

She watched, as he flipped through it. He could do that now. He could flip through his retelling of those terrible events, and he could do it without his distress level spiking. He could do it.

“What’s it like,” she asked, “holding the finished product in your hands after all this time?”

“Hm,” he said. He flipped through it some more, and he sucked on his teeth. “Not going to win a Pulitzer.”

“We weren’t trying to.”

“Glad it’s finally done with.”

“Same here.”

She saw something pass over his face. It was like a quick frown, but then it disappeared. She could not tell if he had purposefully hidden the expression, whatever it was, or if it had just cleared up on its own. He said, “Of course, it’s not really finished, is it?”

She changed her posture. She watched him to see if that expression would return. “No, you’re right. And I think it’s finally time for us to talk about that.”

Crowley had told her, he was being honest. He told her, everything in the book was the truth to the
best of his recollection. He had told her this, and she believed him. She thoroughly believed him. She trusted him. He had also told her, however, that there was one chapter of the story that she could not know, that he could not tell her, that his safety and Aziraphale’s safety and even her own safety depended on her not knowing. And on that matter, too, she had believed him. She trusted him.

“What do you want to do about the redacted chapter?” she asked.

He waved the book backwards and forwards as he thought, as if fanning himself with it.

“Any suggestions?” he asked.

“Well…” She had to think. “It’s tricky, because I really don’t know what’s safe and what’s not. Would it be safe to write it out?”

He moved his head, like he was considering, like what she said was a possibility but he just wasn’t entirely satisfied. “I guess so. Just have to check no one’s watching, then destroy it once I’m done with it.”

“Ideally, of course, you’d write it out and then read through the whole book aloud with the redacted piece included.” This was a puzzle. “Maybe you could read it to Bud?”

Crowley turned to look at his plant in its little gray and red pot. “No, I don’t think so,” he said, and his voice was low. He was gentle and generous, and he was not self-conscious about it. “Bud’s already overheard more of this book than I think is good for her.”

“I see,” she said, and maybe her eyes gave away just how easily he could break her heart open in two.

Crowley, she had understood from the first day she saw him, did not form attachments easily. He felt safe when he was hidden and self-reliant; he did not tread easily into emotional intimacy with others. However, she had also come to understand that, when Crowley did form an attachment to another, it happened quickly, whole-heartedly, and selflessly. Crowley did not act in half-measures. Crowley, when he loved, he loved with the whole of himself.

Crowley had allowed himself to love that little plant with the whole of himself.

Sometimes, it could be a good thing to have your heart broken open in two.

“Maybe there’s no way to get it finished,” he said. He said it like he was disappointed, like he took this to be an undesirable result. But, the way he said it left her thinking about that frown that had passed across his face moments earlier. It left her thinking that perhaps she heard something else in his tone as well. “We can’t be done here until it’s finished, can we?”

Ah, she thought. Yes, she had heard something else in his tone.

“Finishing the book doesn’t mean we have to be done working together,” she said.

“No?” he asked. He asked it, and she thought he sounded like a small child who had just started learning how to trust.

“You’re always welcome to decide we’re done whenever you want, but no. I think there’s still more for us to do.” She smiled. She reassured. And then she pushed: “As long as I’m living, Crowley, I’ll be here for you.”
His eyes snapped up to hers, like he was surprised, and then they turned away. She saw something complicated pass across his face, something like a smile but not quite one. She understood that he had needed that reassurance. She assumed it had felt good to get that reassurance. But she understood another part of it, as well: the clause, *as long as I’m living*, left her with complicated feelings, too.

“Well…” he said, and there was a change to his tone, now. It was no longer dangerous for the book to be finished. “I could read it to Aziraphale.”

“Could you?” She paused, she considered. “You know, a long time ago, I thought it might be a good idea to share the whole book with him--”

“I am *not* doing that.”

She glared at the interruption. “I said, I thought. I wouldn’t recommend it, now, at least not until he’s had his own chance to work through everything that happened.”

He looked down at the cover of the book, ran a finger over it. “It was traumatic for him, too.”

“Maybe. Never can be sure. Two people can go through the exact same event, and one will be traumatized and the other will be just fine. But I wouldn’t want to risk it, not until he’s had plenty of time to process everything himself.”

*The Bandstand*, is what she did not say. *There is no way I am having him read The Bandstand, not unless Dave said he was ready.*

“The redacted chapter’s different, though,” Crowley said, almost as if he could read her thoughts. (She was pretty sure, though, that he couldn’t read her thoughts. She had tested it, and she was pretty confident in the results.) He was still looking down at the book’s cover. “It’s his story, as much as mine. He--it’s our story.”

He looked up at her now, like something had dawned on him, like he had just come to a decision. His eyes were full of something, she thought perhaps hope and determination.

“I want to share it with him,” he said. He said it, and he meant it. He said it, and Aubrey Thyme knew it was a decision that would not be undone. “That’s what I want to do.”

When Crowley loved, he loved with the whole of himself.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s figure out how to do it, then.”

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“How’s the chapter coming?” Aubrey Thyme asked. She had asked this the previous session and the one before that, too.

“Not ready yet,” he replied. He had replied like this the previous session and the one before that, too.

“Uh-huh,” she said.

Unlike previous times, he was starting to look a little embarrassed about the whole thing.

“Maybe we should talk about that,” she said.

“I just can’t find the right words.”
“You aren’t trying to win a Pulitzer, are you?”

He sighed. He shifted in his seat. He looked over to Bud, on the end table, and he reached out to shift the plant’s position one way and then another. Aubrey Thyme waited for him to sort through the thoughts he needed to share.

“It’s just--” he started. He frowned. He was frustrated, and she suspected that he was hiding some fear. “How am I supposed to find a way to express something that there just aren’t even words for?”

Aubrey Thyme could be many things. She could be cruel, and she could be a bit of a prick, and she could be pushy. She could be all of those things, but, even still, she wasn’t cruel enough, or enough of a prick, or pushy enough to point out to Crowley he had literally just asked how to express the ineffable.

She shifted in her seat. She held her chin in her hand, and she watched him.

“You sure there isn’t a word for it?” she asked.

He glanced up at her, then he glanced away.

“Maybe a word with four letters?”

His lip curled, as if in preparation for a sneer.

“Starts with L?”

There it was: there was the sneer.

“Rhymes with dove?”

He groaned and he fidgeted and he shifted this way and that. He reached out to Bud again, picked her up, then set her back down. “We don’t use that word,” he muttered. “Even if I wanted to, we don’t use it.”

Aubrey Thyme could be cruel, and she could be a bit of a prick, and she most definitely could be pushy. So, she responded, “Even if you wanted to use that word?”

“Stop it,” he said, adamant and agitated. He looked like sitting still was growing physically painful. He looked like that, and he shook his head back and forth, emphatic, and adamant, and agitated. “You don’t get it, Aubrey Thyme. You don’t get it.”

There had been times, in the past, when that would have been the end of it. There had been times when he would have said that in order to shut her out, using the gulf between their disparate experiences to reject her. There had been times when she would have had to push and cajole and manipulate him to go on, to tell her more, to let her in. But not now, not with how they were, not with how hard they had both worked to get here. She knew, now, she simply had to wait. He would let her in, if she could just wait.

She waited.

“All those sadistic shitheads up there, know what they say?” he started, and she waited for him to continue. “They say they’re love. That’s what they say. Can’t criticize them, can you, when all their actions are motivated by love. All they do, isn’t it, is love, and best be careful you don’t ever stop accepting that love. You know a group of them attacked Aziraphale once? His superiors, even,
when he hadn’t done a single thing wrong. Punched him, cornered him and punched him. They hurt him, and that’s what love is, Aubrey Thyme. That’s the only thing Aziraphale has ever known as love. He didn’t even want to tell me about it--they had hurt him, those execrable beings of love, and he didn’t think he should even let me know about it. Wanted him to die, wanted to kill him, and would have, too, if we had--” He stopped himself. He clenched his jaw shut tight, turned his head up to the ceiling, and snarled.

His breathing was labored, after giving such a bitter speech. His muscles were tense. He wasn’t fidgeting any more. He was still in that very dangerous way of his. He was still, and his eyes were focused on the ceiling, and she could see the glint in them. She could see the anger in them, the righteousness of the fury in them, the unrelenting power in them that he usually kept shielded. She could see--she could see the whole of him, encapsulated and encased in that deep well of feeling that inspired his fury.

She watched him, she watched the anger and fury in him, and she watched as it was released and then let go. He was capable of fury, and he was a creature with power her mortal mind wasn’t made to understand, but he was also always gentle and generous. He was always gentle and generous, and so he didn’t bring his eyes back down to her until the fury had passed.

“So, we don’t use that word,” he repeated. His eyes were still full of feeling, but they were safe for her to look into. He stared at her, daring or imploring her to understand.

She hadn’t shifted in her seat. She hadn’t changed her posture. She hadn’t reacted at all to his speech or his expressed rage. She hadn’t done anything of the sort, because Aubrey Thyme was his therapist, and he needed a therapist who could hear him when he said what he needed to say.

“He deserves better than that word,” she summarized, quiet and calm. She could see instantly the tension leave Crowley, as soon as it registered that she empathized, that she understood, that she had heard. The tension left him, and he settled back into his seat.

“It’s a word that’s been corrupted,” she went on.

“Exactly,” he said.

“It’s been used as a weapon against him, and it hurts to be reminded of that.”

He expressed himself, and it came out as a whine.

“You need a word like that one, to say what you want to say in the redacted chapter, but the only words we have in English have been used like weapons.”

“Not just English,” he clarified. “Every language. All of them. They’ve hurt him with every language that’s ever existed, and some that haven’t yet.”

She nodded. She understood. She thought, as far as a mortal like herself could understand.

“Well, Crowley…” She shifted in her posture now, stretched out her arms to signal a shift in focus, a change in the direction of the conversation. “So, let’s think it through. What do we do, when we need to say something we don’t have the words for?”

He looked at her. He looked lost. He looked like a small child who had become lost. But, she knew, he would be able to find his way home. She and Crowley, they had worked hard to help him draw the maps and construct the compass that would always allow him to find his way home.
She gestured to Bud, sitting on the table. She gestured to the tree, over by the window. She smiled at him.

“Symbols,” she said. “We use symbols.”

He was listening.

“I am hereby giving you permission to write some bloody poetry,” she said.

He was still listening, but now he was glaring, too.

“It’s painful, hearing you try to use slang like that,” he said.

She shrugged. She grinned. That’s why she had done it, after all.

“Think you can write some poetry that says everything you need to say to Aziraphale?” she asked.

He thought about it. He tapped his fingers against the armrest of his chair.

“I’ll try,” he said, and she knew that he meant it.

What Crowley felt for Aziraphale, he felt with the whole of himself.

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“Let’s settle on a date,” she said. She said this because he was stalling. She said this because, she knew, Crowley would keep on stalling. She said this because she knew how much Crowley always wanted to rip his book to shreds, and she could only imagine how many drafts of the redacted chapter had met just that fate.

Crowley, she knew, could not accept from himself anything less than perfection. He hated himself, given the prospect of offering to Aziraphale anything less than perfection. It was Aubrey Thyme’s job to get him to stop with that already.

Crowley was stalling, and it was Aubrey Thyme’s job to get him to stop it.

“It’ll be ready when it’s ready,” he said.

“Sure,” she agreed. It’s always easiest to get someone to do what you want, when all you do is agree with them. “And how about we say that it’ll be ready two weeks from now?”

He sneered and he grumbled, and the two combined ended up seeming pretty close to a pout.

“What’s Aziraphale’s schedule like?” she pushed. “Would he be able to join us, two weeks from now?”

This was her being a bit of an asshole. Nowadays, Aziraphale spent each of their sessions sitting in the waiting area outside, they both knew. She was just being an asshole, because she wanted him to have to say the answer.

He, of course, didn’t want to say the answer. So, he didn’t answer.

“How about it, Bud?” Aubrey Thyme said, swivelling her head enough to the side to make it clear she was now addressing the plant. “Can Crowley be ready two weeks from now?”

Crowley gave her a look. It was a look that said, *I really wish I hated you sometimes.* She grinned
in response. It was a grin that said, *I'm fine with that.*

She leaned forward a little, towards Crowley, and stage whispered, “What’s Bud’s response?”

“If I’d known you’d end up being like this, back when I first came here, I wouldn’t have stayed for even a single session. You know that right?”

“If I’d known I’d be like this, back then, I wouldn’t have either.” She kept on grinning. It felt good, being open and honest. “What’s Bud’s response?”

Bud, apparently, didn’t have a response. So, Aubrey Thyme addressed the little plant again. “Hey, Bud, can Crowley trust me?”

Eyes back on Crowley: *what’s Bud’s response?*

“Yes, Herb, I trust you,” Crowley said, like he was resigned to playing her game, even though he was actually refusing to play her game. It really did feel good, getting to be open and honest.

“And can he trust Aziraphale?” she asked the little plant.

“Of course,” Crowley said, without hesitation, without pause, without even the air of resigned acceptance that he had capitulated to playing her game. Because, what Crowley felt for Aziraphale, he felt with the whole of himself.

“One more question, Bud,” she said, because Aubrey Thyme knew how to work with the rule of threes, and she knew what Bud was here to do. “Can Crowley trust himself?”

That was the question that hit home. That was the question that hurt, that made it hard to be open and honest. She could see it on Crowley’s face, when she turned her attention away from the little plant. She could see it in his eyes, that this was the question that frightened him.

“Two weeks,” she said, soft and gentle, letting the great compassion she held for him bleed away the silliness and frivolity of the last few minutes. She said, “Trust me, and trust Aziraphale, and trust Bud.”

He didn’t say yes, but he also didn’t say no. He didn’t say no, and so she would push just a little bit more. “You can share the chapter with Aziraphale in two weeks.”

“Fine,” he mumbled.

It scared the shit out of him, she could tell, but he said it anyway. It filled her heart with something like pride, something more than pride, something that she felt in particular for her clients who were willing to do hard work even when it scared the shit out of them. It was this feeling that she felt with the whole of herself.

***

The next week was focused on planning and preparation. They set up ground rules. They practiced. They acted out how it would go. They evaluated worst case, best case, and most likely scenarios. They did everything they could, to get Crowley to feel comfortable.

They sat, in silence, as Crowley’s system thrummed with the nervous energy that came from trying to trust himself.

“It’s not ready,” he said. “It’s not good enough.”
“When would it be good enough?” she asked, knowing the answer.

“Never,” he said, because that was always going to be his answer.

“No, that’s not right,” she said. “Stop trying to make it perfect. It doesn’t have to be perfect.”

He sighed.

“I know it is hard, but you’re going to have to trust that it is good enough,” she said, and then she pushed him just a little bit more. “You’re going to have to trust that you’re good enough.”

He sighed again.

***

Crowley entered her office first, and Aziraphale followed. She had rearranged the room so that all three could comfortably sit: the two armchairs side by side, and her computer chair across from them both. Crowley, of course, immediately went and sat in his customary seat, setting Bud down in her spot. Aziraphale, unlike Crowley, paused just inside the doorway. He gave Aubrey Thyme a small smile, and then he looked around the room.

It occurred to her, as he looked around the room, that this was the first time he had been in her office without being distracted by some looming emergency. This was the first time, perhaps, that he could be comfortable while in her space.

“Oh!” Aziraphale exclaimed, sounding very pleased, and he walked over to the tree in the window. “I remember you!”

Both Aubrey Thyme and Crowley turned to watch him as he reached out to fuss with the tree. Both of them watched as Aziraphale touched one of the tree’s leaves. Both of them watched, as the tree vibrated and grew just a bit fuller, the leaves just a bit more robust and verdant. They both watched as Aziraphale, without even thinking about it, healed Aubrey Thyme’s tree.

“Aziraphale!” Crowley hissed from his seat. “Get away from that!”

“What?” Aziraphale could clearly tell he had upset Crowley, but it was also clear he didn’t understand how or why. He turned to look at Crowley, but he stayed in place.

“You can’t just heal her tree!” Crowley was exasperated.

“I don’t see why not!” Aziraphale defended himself.

“Guys--” Aubrey Thyme tried, still standing by the door.

“We have a contract and everything,” Crowley whined, gesticulating. “I only just got her to accept that plant food is a real thing, and you come and just heal it like that?”

That wasn’t quite true. She accepted that there were products called plant food. After he had first brought it up, after she had finished laughing at what she took to be a joke, after he had very strenuously insisted that it wasn’t a joke, she had gone online and found out that plant food really was a thing she could purchase. But, she still wasn’t convinced it always had been a real thing. She didn’t know the extent of Crowley’s powers, but she did know the extent of his pettiness and his willingness to follow through on a prank. Being a mortal with a demon for a client, she accepted, meant not always getting to know for sure whether plant food was something that had existed before he decided to convince her that it did.
“You have a contract about a tree?” Aziraphale said, as if confused.

“Look, you just don’t understand,” Crowley said. “It’s a whole thing. It’s all symbolic. She’s obsessed with symbols. Can’t scratch your nose in here without her treating it like it means something.”

Well, fuck you too, Crowley, she thought.

“Guys,” she tried again, louder now, settling a powerful glare on Crowley. It seemed to do the trick, so she softened her expression and turned to Aziraphale.

She turned her attention to Aziraphale, and she drummed up all the courage it took to do something that scared the shit out of her.

“Thank you,” she said, and she pushed herself to mean it. She glanced quickly back to Crowley, and then she continued. “You saw the tree was struggling, and you helped it. Thank you.”

This wasn’t fair to Aziraphale. He didn’t know what he had walked into. He didn’t know the full significance of what was happening. He had simply performed a kindness, out of the goodness of his heart, without even having thought about it. This wasn’t fair to him, and he seemed to know it, and he also seemed to not know what to do about it. His expression was caught between guilt and graciousness.

“Oh, well--” he started, then he stopped. His fingers pulled at his waistcoat. His eyes kept travelling back between her and Crowley. “It was--nothing. I simply thought--”

“Come sit down, Angel,” Crowley said, the exasperation completely gone from him, the whole of his voice filled with what he felt for Aziraphale. He was patient and sweet, gentle and generous. He was always patient and sweet with Aziraphale, even when he was exasperated and grumpy. Perhaps, especially, when he was exasperated and grumpy.

Aziraphale came and sat down beside him.

Aubrey Thyme paused for a moment longer by the door. She paused, and she caught Crowley’s eye. She paused, she caught his eye, and she waited until he nodded. She nodded back. They were in agreement: the contract still stands.

Then, she came, and she sat across from the both of them.

“Right,” she said, gathering her thoughts, thinking through how far off the tracks they had gotten. “Thank you for joining us today, Aziraphale.”

“That’s another thing she does in here,” Crowley mumbled. “Says thank you for absolutely everything.”

Good old Crowley, she thought, but she wasn’t going to rise to his bait. It was okay if he felt he needed to bait her--she knew how nervous he was, how hard she had pushed him to come to this point--and she wasn’t going to rise to his bait.

“As you know,” she went on, addressing Aziraphale, because she was going to continue with the plan they had painstakingly worked out, even if Crowley intended to keep going off script. “Crowley and I have been spending a lot of time working through the events surrounding the fire at your bookshop.”

“Right, yes,” Aziraphale said. He was committed. He was so committed. He had come here, today,
for Crowley, for Crowley’s sake, and he was completely committed. He nodded, and he waited for her to continue.

“Here, I wrote this,” Crowley said, cutting off her explanation, going too fast. He said it while pulling some paper out of his jacket pocket and pushing it at Aziraphale. “So you can read it, I guess.”

They had planned. They had fucking prepared. They had come up with a goddamn fucking script and they had practiced it, and of course it was all thrown right out the window, as soon as Crowley was in the actual situation.

It took the full extent of Aubrey Thyme’s professionalism to avoid rolling her eyes until they fell right the fuck out of her head.

“You wrote this?” Aziraphale said, his voice quiet. He took the paper in his hands. He seemed surprised, in his hesitant way, and perhaps pleased, in his gentle and careful way.

“We’ve been writing out Crowley’s recollections of everything surrounding the fire,” she interjected. Crowley might have thrown their plan right out the window, but she wouldn’t. He had given strict ground rules: she was not to refer to what they had done as writing a book. Crowley was too proud to let Aziraphale hear it described as a book. And even though he was doing nothing but bait her, and even though he was doing everything in his power to be his good old adversarial self, she would respect his ground rules. “There was one section, though, that he said he couldn’t share with me--”

“Oh, yes, of course,” Aziraphale said, still looking down, immediately seeming to understand. Aubrey Thyme did not take offense at the interruption.

“So just read it,” Crowley said, and Aubrey Thyme did take a bit of offense at this interruption.

“Crowley, would you like to tell Aziraphale why you wanted to share this with him, before he reads it?” she asked, because fuck you, Crowley.

“No,” he said, the ass.

“I can’t believe you wrote something for me, my dear,” Aziraphale said. Aubrey Thyme watched as his eyes flicked up to Crowley, then back down to the paper, then up again. Aubrey Thyme watched his eyes, and she saw that they were already turning glossy.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” Crowley mumbled, fooling no one in the room, not even the plants.

“Oh,” Aziraphale said, and it was impressive just how full of meaning a single syllable from him could be.

“So, just read it, okay?” Crowley said. Aubrey Thyme could see how antsy he was, how scared he was, how vulnerable he was allowing himself to be.

Almost as if acting from mercy, Aziraphale began to read.

Professional psychotherapists, like Aubrey Thyme, can practice a variety of different types of therapy. Individual therapy, in which the therapist works with a single client, is perhaps the most famous style. Group therapy, in which the therapist works with an entire group, is an incredibly powerful modality, even if those who could most benefit from group view it with suspicion. Aubrey Thyme practiced both of these types of therapy. She ran groups, and she worked with individuals. There were modes of therapy, however, that she did not practice, that she had no
interest in practicing, that she regarded as most likely the equivalent to having her skin flayed.
Family therapy was one of them. Aubrey Thyme did not get families. Couples therapy was another. Aubrey Thyme did not get couples. She didn’t like having to navigate the complexities of a couple’s interactions, a family system’s internal mechanisms. She didn’t like the loss of control she experienced when confronted with a family or a couple. They could be interesting, in a clinical sort of way, but she didn’t want to have to work with them.

Just look how this session had gone, for proof: she had worked with her client to set up a plan, and he had been compliant and conscientious while practicing it, and then it had all gone out the window, soon as the third person was in the room.

Aubrey Thyme hated it.

There were aspects to couples and families, Aubrey Thyme had enough insight to recognize, that just didn’t make sense to her. They would never make sense to her, she was fairly sure. She just wasn’t set up internally, she felt, to make sense of couples and families. She could appreciate the great depth of feeling someone like Crowley could hold for someone like Aziraphale, and she could be amazed by it, heartbroken by it, touched deeply by the significance of it. But, she felt, she didn’t truly understand it. She felt, she would never truly understand it.

Aubrey Thyme was at peace with this aspect of herself.

She may not truly understand it, but it could still break her heart right open in two, the way that Crowley watched Aziraphale as Aziraphale read. She could feel her heart break open in two, as she saw the hope and affection and naked vulnerability on Crowley’s face. She could feel it, as she watched how thoroughly and irrevocably Crowley’s attention was focused on Aziraphale, and only Aziraphale.

What Crowley felt for Aziraphale, he felt with the whole of himself.

She watched as Crowley seemed to drink up each small movement and sound that came from Aziraphale. There were small noises: an “ah,” at one point, an “oh,” even a chuckle. Crowley, she thought, thrived on these noises. Crowley, she thought, lived for them.

Aubrey Thyme did not get couples and families, but she could appreciate what she saw.

She could appreciate the way that Aziraphale wiped at his eyes, as he read. She could appreciate how Crowley reached for a tissue without even looking and handed it over to his companion. She could appreciate how Aziraphale took it, looking up, smiling with a deeper affection than Aubrey Thyme thought she had ever seen expressed by anyone, ever before.

She could appreciate just how much Aziraphale meant, once he had finished reading the redacted chapter, once he met Crowley’s eyes, as he said: “Oh, Crowley, my dear. Crowley.”

Crowley was a poet, Aubrey Thyme had known. She had never actually read any of his finished poetry, but she knew he was a poet.

“I should like to keep this on my shelf. Yes, right next to Hamlet,” Aziraphale said.

The fuck? Aubrey Thyme thought, but she wasn’t going to distract them in this moment.

This moment wasn’t about her. This moment wasn’t about her reconsidering how much Crowley had disliked her joking about Shakespeare. In this moment, Aubrey Thyme’s role was simply to observe. It was her role to act as witness, to ignore all the questions she suddenly found rolling in her mind. It was her job, her responsibility and honor, to be merely observer and witness.
“You know we can’t do that,” Crowley said. His voice was deep and low, consolatory. His eyes never left Aziraphale. “We can’t keep it.”

“Oh, yes, I know…” Aziraphale said. He looked down from Crowley, looked at the redacted chapter that he held on a knee. He ran his fingers over the paper, as if smoothing it out, as if it were too precious to imagine destroying it. “It would be nice to be able to, though, wouldn’t it? Oh, Crowley. It’s simply perfect.”

Aubrey Thyme’s role was simply to observe and witness--that is, until it was her role to intervene.

“I’m wondering, Aziraphale…” She said, quietly, with a gentle clearing of her throat. “Would you be willing to clarify that a bit? When you say it’s perfect…”

“I mean that it’s from you,” Aziraphale said, not skipping a beat, seeking out Crowley’s eyes. He reached out a hand, into the space between the two chairs. He reached out a hand, and Crowley joined him in that in-between space. They reached out, together, towards each other, and they clasped hold of each others’ hands. They held on to each other, they held on tight.

“You wrote this,” Aziraphale continued. He had his tissue in his free hand, and he wiped at his eyes again without breaking his gaze, without turning away from Crowley. “You wrote this for me, Crowley. Oh, why aren’t you always writing, my dear?”

Crowley smiled. He smiled at Aziraphale. Aubrey Thyme watched as Crowley smiled at Aziraphale. She would never get it, everything that a smile like that could convey, but she could appreciate it. She could be honored by it, by being granted the role of standing as observer and witness to it.

“We have to burn it, you know,” Crowley said.

“Yes,” Aziraphale said. He sounded resigned, but then something meaningful flickered across his face. He smiled in a private sort of way. “Yes, we should burn it, and then we shall take the ashes and drown them, shan’t we?”

“Yes,” Crowley said, and it was his turn to smile. He smiled in a way that quickly turned into a contented grin. “Yes, that’s exactly what we’ll do.”

She had no idea what was contained within that redacted chapter. That was the whole point of this exercise: to keep her too-mortal mind from knowing whatever was described in the redacted chapter. She wondered, though. She wondered what it could have been, that had allowed Crowley to express so much to Aziraphale, as he clearly had done. She wondered how the prospect of taking something beautiful, burning it to ashes, and then drowning it could have as much romantic import as Crowley and Aziraphale clearly saw it to have. She wondered just what it was that had happened in that time between the showdown in Tadfield and their lunch at the Ritz. She could do nothing but wonder.

She had to wonder what had happened, what Crowley had expressed through poetry, what it was that had apparently been so meaningful for both of them. She had to wonder how it fit into the rest of the trauma narrative she now knew so well. She had to wonder what Aziraphale’s version of the whole of that trauma narrative would have been like, what the whole of the book would have been like, if Aziraphale had been the one to write it out. She had to wonder, too, what really had happened, what the story would look like if told by someone who hadn’t been part of the events, someone who hadn’t been traumatized by them. She had to wonder what the story of the week when the world hadn’t ended would have been like, if it had been told by some sort of omniscient narrator, some impartial spectator who could describe it all with infinite clarity and accuracy.
Aubrey Thyme did not believe in the existence of any such impartial spectator. She did not live in a world, she believed, in which anyone was positioned to tell the whole of a story, to lay it out without bias. She knew Who would proclaim Herself to be an impartial, unbiased spectator, but Aubrey Thyme rejected that. She rejected Her as an authority, as an impartial narrator, as a source of truth. Aubrey Thyme did not believe that she lived in a world where any omnisciently narrated book could exist, and, as she watched Crowley and Aziraphale hold hands over the redacted chapter she would never be allowed to read, she knew she would never get to understand the whole of their story.

She knew all that. She knew more as well. She knew, as she saw how Crowley looked at Aziraphale and how Aziraphale looked at Crowley, as she reflected on the whole of Crowley’s reasons for rejecting love, for protecting Aziraphale from that four-letter word, as she reflected on everything she knew about her client and his preternatural partner, she knew: whatever the story might look like, whoever might tell it, from whatever perspective it might be presented, it most certainly was a love story.

Aubrey Thyme did not believe that she was the sort of person who deserved to be witness to a love story like this. She felt just how fully she was not deserving. But she was grateful for it. She was grateful, and she believed that getting to experience moments like this, while working with a client like Crowley, was likely the closest a human like her would ever come to the feeling of grace.

Aubrey Thyme was grateful for the role she was positioned to play, as observer and witness.

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She said goodbye to Aziraphale. She closed the door behind him, and then she returned to her computer chair, still positioned across from Crowley. Aziraphale would wait another fifteen minutes, as she and Crowley checked in. A joint session, like the one they had just had, was always best followed by a chance to process what had happened.

“Wasn’t so bad, really,” Crowley said.

“Uh-huh.”

“Went well, I guess.”

“Sure.”

“I’m glad I did it.”

“Bingo,” she said. She smiled.
The final phase of therapy, according to the tri-phasic model of trauma, is often referred to as Reconnection. It is in this phase that the focus of therapy turns primarily to questions of meaning and value. It is in this phase that the trauma survivor is given the opportunity to think through the many choices available to him and the values that he wants to have structure his life. It is during this phase that the trauma survivor is encouraged to see himself as more than a trauma survivor, to learn how to define himself and his life around more than just the terrible things that have happened to him.

Of course, the tri-phasic model of trauma provides only an abstract representation of how trauma therapy actually works. The three phases are not as clear-cut as the model may make it seem. Questions of meaning and value work their way into just about all therapy, including the first and second phases of trauma work. They certainly had, for Aubrey Thyme, as she worked with her client, Anthony J. Crowley. Now that his trauma narrative was complete, however, it was time to turn their attention more fully to these complex and difficult questions: What do you want to live for? Who do you want to be?

Generally, during the third and final phase of trauma therapy, Aubrey Thyme would allow herself to take on more of an existentialist stance with her clients. Existentialist therapy, after all, is entirely focused around what one chooses for oneself, what values one will take on and use to guide one’s life. It wasn’t always the most clearly defined form of therapy, and it didn’t always allow for easily identifiable treatment goals, but it could be useful. It could be useful, for humans, to approach life through the lens of existentialism.

The problem Aubrey Thyme faced was this: existentialism is built from a single, central, foundational assumption. Existentialist therapy always, always begins with this: Your death is inevitable, so what do you want to do with the time you have left?

Existentialism was, most definitely, a therapeutic approach designed with mortals in mind. All humans die. Aubrey Thyme would die. There were no resources, no practitioner guides, nothing about how to approach the meaning of life without the assumption of an inevitable death. What does it mean to live a good life, when there is neither birth nor death to bookend the time one has to walk on Earth?

It was hard enough, in Aubrey Thyme’s professional opinion, to make sense of the whole of one’s life, when one can expect to have, at best, 60 more years to go. What hope could a mortal like her have, helping a person make sense of more than 6000 years of personal history and a future that could go on infinitely?

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“You brought something,” Crowley said, as he made his way over to his chair, removed his sunglasses, and set down Bud in her spot. He said it because he could see the bag Aubrey Thyme had positioned by the side of her own chair. He was always very observant, always aware of any
changes to his environment.

“I did, indeed,” she said, closing the door behind him, moving to her chair. “Can you tell what it is?”

He made a face. “How would I be able to tell what you have in your bag?”

She made a face back at him.

“It’s just an idea I had,” she said, pulling the bag up into her lap. She didn’t open it yet, she just held it for now. She was going to be careful. “I’m not sure if it is a good idea or not. You have to let me know if I’m overstepping, or if we’re wandering into dangerous territories.”

That got his attention. He raised an eyebrow, curiosity piqued. “What have you got in there?”

She still didn’t open the bag. “Everything we’ve done has revolved around books, hasn’t it? So, I didn’t see why we shouldn’t keep up with the theme.”

“Oh, good, a book,” he groaned, the theatrical son of a bitch that he was.

“Well…” she said, with a nod of her head to the side, as if she were innocently considering his meaning. “Some people would say it’s a good one, at least.”

She waited, at that, watching for recognition to dawn in his face. She gave a grin—not a big one, not a satisfied one, just a small one.

“I can’t believe you,” he said, and he sounded tickled, rather than shocked.

“Is it safe for me to bring it out?”

He made a flourish with his hands. “It’s just a book, Aubrey.”

It was annoying how he acted like the rules of his existence made any goddamned sense, like she should be able to know without asking what he could and couldn’t do, what was and wasn’t safe for him. Good old Crowley, she thought, as she pulled The Good Book out from her bag.

It was a nice Bible, she had to admit. It was leather bound, with gold trim. It was large and thick, not one of those pitiful things that’s given out for free. There was heft to it. It was the sort of Bible, Aubrey Thyme thought, that would be great for throwing at someone, if you were limited in your choice of weapon but still really wanted to do some damage.

She held the Bible up, in the space between them.

He looked at it. He looked at her, and then he looked at it. And, he looked amused. “You taking up proselytizing? I’m an odd choice for your first target, but alright, I’ll hear you out.”

“Ha. Shut up,” she said. She moved the Bible around a bit, let the gold-edged pages flap a little. “Let me tell you what I was thinking.”

He leaned back to get comfortable in his chair. It was a signal, he was listening.

“I’ve been thinking,” she began. “You’ve been around for the whole history of the Earth, which, from my perspective at least, is a pretty long time. It’s going to be hard for us to work through everything that you’ve lived through, everything you’ve done, and everything you can do throughout all the rest of time. So, my idea was, why start from scratch in doing all that, when we’ve got something like a rough draft already written out for us?”
She raised her eyebrows, gave a shrug.

“‘You know, the accuracy of that thing is greatly exaggerated,’” he said. It wasn’t a rejection, though.

“I bet.” She nodded. “The point is, use it as a draft. Make it accurate. Make it your own.”

“My own?” he asked. She could tell that he was thinking. His head was tilted just a little to the side now, and he was regarding her. That, she knew well by this point, meant that he was not entirely sold yet but was open to hearing more.

“You could re-write it. Or, go through and redact all the bullshit. Turn it into some sort of poetry. Or, I don’t know, tear it up into shreds and turn it into paper mache.” She hadn’t worked out any specific ideas, really. She’d come into the session with nothing more than half a plan and trust in their joint capacity to improvise. Well, that, and also a Bible. “It would be up to you to figure out what sort of project would be valuable for you. We could work on it, in here, either together or you on your own.”

“Hm,” he said, because he was still thinking. He leaned forward and held out a hand, so she gave the Bible over to him. He looked down at it, as he held it.

“Of course,” she went on, because she had at least thought this through enough to recognize where the snags could be, “it doesn’t contain the whole history of everything, does it? It starts just with the creation of the Earth. So, we’d have to work out something for everything that came before that.”

“Hm,” he said again, now turning the Bible over. He ran a thumb over the edge of the leather binding, pulled at the front cover enough just to see how pliable it was. “I can think of something…”

He suddenly grew still, and then he sniffed.

“Aubrey,” he said, his eyes darting up to catch her in his sights. He hadn’t looked shocked or scandalized before, but now she saw a glimmer of something like that in his expression. “This is yours.”

“What?”

“This.” He raised the Bible just a little, as if the referent of the phrase could have been up for debate. He was still looking at her. “This is your Bible. I can smell it.”

Well, shit, she thought. Because, yes, he was right, it was her own Bible, and apparently that was something that mattered. She decided to lean into sarcasm, to defend against the sincerity it seemed he had somehow just found.

“I don’t know how things are over in England,” she said, “but here in the States? Sometimes, you just wake up and find yourself in possession of a Bible.”

He gave a small snort, an acknowledgement that she was joking. But he kept on looking at her.

“Oh, fine,” she sighed, repositioning herself in her seat, leaning an elbow on her armrest. “It was a gift from a misguided aunt, back when I was in high school. And now I’m trying to declutter, so…” She shrugged.

He seemed satisfied with that answer, turning his eyes back down to the Bible. “You know,” he
said, and there was something about his tone, not entirely like he was amused, but something near to amused. “I may be retired, and you... Well, we both know your situation. But, all the same?”

Now he looked back up at her, and he was grinning. “You have no idea what it’s like, as a demon, to have a human hand over her personal Bible and ask you to desecrate it.”

“Ha,” she said, feeling now a bit awkward. It was challenging, navigating waters she didn’t understand. But at least Crowley seemed amused. Or something like amused, something in the ballpark of amused. Satisfied, perhaps—or, perhaps, she thought, maybe what he seemed was gluttonous. She didn’t know what to think, if that was the correct interpretation of how he seemed.

She cleared her throat and got back on track: “So, what do you think?”

He pursed his lips, the way he did when he was developing a plan. He turned his attention back down to the book. “I’ll need supplies.”

“Sure. Tell me what you need, and I’ll get it.”

“Oh, I think those will do.” He moved his head without looking up, indicating over to the side of the room. She looked, and she saw what was now stacked up on her desk: blank canvases, glues, dyes, inks, and other similar supplies.

Crowley, Aubrey Thyme came to learn, was an artist.

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Someone as fidgety and wiggly as Crowley shouldn’t be so good at meticulous details. It made sense, though, once Aubrey Thyme put her mind to reasoning it through. He was a planner, a designer. He would have made a good architect, someone who could take in the whole of a desired structure and puzzle through the specifications that would allow it to hang together. He had so much constant, pent up energy, and working through those meticulous details gave that energy an outlet. He was free to think and talk, so long as his hands were occupied. The opposite of idle hands, or something.

He didn’t work through the Bible from the beginning. That would have been too orderly. He worked, it seemed, randomly. She could notice no pattern to what books in the Bible he focused on, or when, and he didn’t provide any reasons for his choices either.

They established a new normal. Crowley would lay out on the floor, whole body stretched long, belly to the ground, propped up on his elbows with his supplies in front of him. It was obvious, he was so comfortable this way. It was obvious, and Aubrey Thyme couldn’t believe she hadn’t realized it sooner that there had never been a good reason for him to be confined to a seat. From the very first time she saw him, it was clear he wasn’t meant for sitting, and yet only now did she realize there had been an alternative available to them.

While he was stretched out, working on his project, she would sit on the floor nearby. She would lean against the side of her armchair, and she would watch idly while he worked. They would chat, converse, while he worked.

He had scissors. He cut out the words, one by one. He dismantled the books of the Bible, chapter by chapter, a single word at a time, and he reordered them into artworks.

The first he did was Leviticus. That, he transformed into the image of a hand holding an oyster shell. She had thought that was clever, at first. Then, after he had explained it to her, she thought it was both very sweet and also clever.
Of course, he wasn’t satisfied by it. He wouldn’t have been satisfied by it, no matter how it had turned out. She was sitting there, leaning against her armchair, when he shifted into a bitter tenseness and his sharp fingernails tore into the canvas. Of course he would have done that; there had been no doubt in Aubrey Thyme’s mind that Crowley would try to destroy what he made.

That was why Aubrey Thyme had come prepared. Soon as the canvas was ripped, she stood, marched over to her desk, and pulled out the canvas repair kit she had purchased on her own. Then she marched back over to him, slapped it on the floor to his side, and growled, “Fix it.”

He was snippy about it. They were both snippy. They bickered and they griped, as he went about fixing it. He pretended she was responsible for the repaired canvas looking worse than it had before. She called him out on his bullshit. It worked.

The next session, they spoke at length about the Japanese art of kintsugi. Aubrey Thyme almost always found herself talking to trauma survivors, at some point or another, about the Japanese art of kintsugi.

“Things can be beautiful when they’re not perfect,” she said, as he held the gold-repaired bowl she kept just for these purposes. “They can be beautiful because they’re not perfect.”

He didn’t believe her. Not entirely, not thoroughly. He didn’t have it in him to believe her, not yet. But he was trying, and he was committed, and he was working very hard. He was trying, and he was committed, and the Bible is a very long book. They had plenty of time.

There was a theme to many of the pieces he made, a theme that was in no way a surprise. Here was a close-up of an eye, stunningly blue and piercingly kind, laughter lines crinkling at its edge. Here were lips, curled up into a smile. Here was a rolled parchment clutched under an arm. Of course, the history of the whole world could be, for Crowley, a character study of Aziraphale.

Song of Solomon became a bared ankle, rising from an old-fashioned shoe. Aubrey Thyme chose not to ask too much about that one.

Not every piece was of Aziraphale, though. She was glad about that, relieved when she first noticed him working on a different theme. Crowley was a whole being, after all, not just Aziraphale’s sidekick. There was so much he needed to process, beyond his experiences with the one angel.

One major theme that emerged from his pieces began with the boring sections. The first he did came from the instructions for building a tabernacle: this, he turned into a portrait of a child. Then he worked with descriptions of who begat who: this, another portrait of a child. Census records became a portrait of a child. Specifications for sacrifices became a portrait of a child. The story of the ark became the portrait of a child.

“These are just some that I remember off the top of my head,” he said, quiet, soft. “There are so many… You lot all come and go so fast. I couldn’t remember them all if I tried.”

She didn’t want to ask. She knew the answer, just by looking, by hearing how he sounded, so she really didn’t want to ask. But it was her job to ask. She knew, she had to ask.

“Crowley,” she made herself ask, “why do you remember them as children?”

It took many long and terrible weeks for them to work through the answer to what she had asked. The first time she heard Crowley scream--truly, horrifyingly scream--was when he came to the
story of Abraham and Isaac. He was cutting out words, and then suddenly he wasn’t. He was standing, pacing, shaking and shouting, and then he screamed. He screamed, allowing himself to let go in a way she had never seen before. He screamed, and it left her shaken, as she sat on the floor and watched him.

He screamed, and then he sobbed. And then they talked about it.

It took a long while for them to process through what that scream had been like for him. It took a long while for them to process through what it meant, for him, for them, that he had scared her, even if just a little. He felt humanly guilt about having done it at all, and he felt demonic pride to have finally managed it. And, on top of that, he felt demonic shame about the guilt and humanly shame about the pride. It was confusing for him. He didn’t know who he wanted to be, not entirely. He didn’t know who he was allowed to be.

They still had so much time.

They worked through it. They worked through it, together. They trusted each other, after all. They trusted each other, and they liked each other, and Aubrey Thyme was satisfied for the opportunity to show that they could trust each other and like each other, even when he let himself feel all the demonic things he felt. Even when he let her see the terrifying edges of his justified rage.

Not all of his stories were painful, of course. He had happy stories, too, and talking through them was fun. The first time he came across the name Elijah, he burst out laughing and then couldn’t contain his giggles. It took a full ten minutes for him to calm down enough to share with her what was so funny. And then they had both ended up laughing, together, for the rest of the session.

There is meaning in our experiences of happiness. There is meaning in the joint appreciation of life’s goodness.

He undid the book’s binding, taking off the leather cover. He tested it in his hands, as if thinking, and he told her he had a plan for it, but he would have to work on it outside her office.

“With Aziraphale?” she asked. She wanted him involved in the art project, in some way, especially once Crowley had assured her that Aziraphale wouldn’t take offense to the Bible’s desecration.

“No.” He shook his head, still testing how the leather could stretch and fold. “I’m going to do this on my own. I’ll bring it in, when I’m done.”

That was a little disappointing, but she was curious to see what he would come up with.

Her curiosity was sated a few weeks later. He came into the office, reached into his jacket pocket, and pulled out a small lamp. It looked like an antique, but it wasn’t fancy.

“Oh, come on,” she griped, in good humor. “We both know that couldn’t have actually been in your pocket. Why even pretend?”

He muttered something, then went about setting up the lamp on a table. Then he reached back into his pocket and pulled out a lampshade. She looked at it, and then she realized what the it was: the leather binding, stretched and dyed and transformed.

“Get the lights, will you?” he asked, as he got the lampshade situated.

She did better than get the lights. She turned them off, and she also closed the blinds on her window. It was dark, until Crowley turned the switch on the lamp.
He had poked holes in the leather. Leatherworking of this sort, she assumed, was not easy. She could only imagine the care and precision it would take to do this. He had poked holes in the leather, so that there were small pinpricks of light shining through, onto the walls and ceiling.

“Wow,” she said. They stood together in the darkened room, staring up at a ceiling full of shining dots of light.

“It’s cheesy,” he sighed.

“No,” she insisted. “No, it is not.”

It took her a long moment to realize what she was looking at. This wasn’t just some crude facsimile. She started to spot the details. There was the little dipper, there was Orion’s belt, there was the Northern star… That fucker, he’d recreated the night sky, and the amount of care and precision it would take to manage that literally took her breath away.

“Explain this to me,” she said, still reeling from the awe. “I want to understand all of this.”

He explained. He explained, and it did nothing to lessen that gut-punch sensation of awe.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

“It’s cheesy,” he repeated.

“You know who I bet would love this?” she asked, as they were still illuminated just by those small pinpricks of light. She didn’t wait for an answer, because they both knew the answer. “It would make a great anniversary gift, don’t you think?”

He was silent for a moment. Then he said, “We don’t have an anniversary.”

“Sure you do!” She smiled. “Or, what is it? A week-iversary? It was the seventh day, right? Or, wait, the eighth? An eighth-day-iversary?”

He groaned, clearly enjoying the true hideousness that was the concept of a week-iversary, before giving himself a moment, she thought, to revel in the romanticism hidden within the idea of an eighth-day-iversary. But then he gave it up.

He repeated: “We don’t have an anniversary.”

She took her time to respond, staring up at pinpricks of light.

“So make one,” she said.

She said it, and she could tell that he had heard her.

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It was luxurious, the direction their work had taken. It was luxurious, how slowly it allowed them to go, how freely it allowed Crowley to talk and feel, how impressively clever and thoughtful he could be when he allowed himself to work with his hands. There came a point when he no longer shouted at his creations for being failures. There came a point where he no longer had to repair ripped up canvases. There came a point where she didn’t even bother buying canvas repair kits anymore.

“Look…” he said one day, in a way that got her attention. He sounded little, perhaps hesitant. He was working on a portrait of Bud, who now was in too large a pot to be brought with him regularly.
He was gluing down words that he had dyed a light green, and he wasn’t looking at her. “I want you to keep this one.”

He sounded little and hesitant. He sounded like he had pushed the words out before he could be terrified by the vulnerability implied by them.

She didn’t entirely trust herself with a thorough response. She didn’t trust the tears she felt welling up in her eyes, just from that simple offer.

“Oh yeah?” she managed.

“Just, you know…” He wanted to back away from the intimacy of the offer, she could tell. He wanted to hide away the vulnerability that came from offering something of himself to another. But he was working so very hard, and their therapeutic alliance was so very strong. “Don’t have to frame it and hang it up or anything. Can keep it locked up in a drawer if you want. Just… a gift.”

She had to wipe a tear from her eye. “I’ll treasure it.”

“Don’t grow soft on me, Herb,” he said, without looking up.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” She laughed, still wiping at her eyes, but she wouldn’t let him distract her, not from this, not for too long. “It means a lot to me, Crowley. Thank you.”

He shrugged like it didn’t matter. It did matter. They both knew it mattered.

Once the picture of Bud was complete, Aubrey Thyme noticed something unusual about it. She hadn’t noticed it at first. She hadn’t been paying attention to which words, exactly, he was using to construct the picture of Bud. But once she noticed, she paid close attention. She counted up the repetitions she saw. She even got out a magnifying glass, to help her make sure she got the count correct.

In Bud’s leaves were 61 instances of the name Mary. In the Bible, there were a total of 61 instances of the name Mary. Each and every one of them had made its way into Bud’s leaves.

She kept that knowledge to herself. She sat on it, and she mulled it over. She kept it to herself, until it seemed like the time was right.

This version of the Bible had some text in red, interspersed throughout the New Testament. For a long time, Crowley did not do anything with any of that red text. He was extremely careful with it, though. He cut out each word that appeared in red, as carefully as he could. He took each bit of red text, and he stored it all in a small box. He stored it, and he kept it all safe.

And then, he turned that red text into a portrait of a man’s face.

“You knew him,” she said.

“Mmhmm.” He glued red words on top of other red words.

“He knew you by the name Mary,” she said.

“No,” he sighed. “They just lumped everyone together under the name Mary. So much easier, isn’t it, than having to think of women as individuals.”

It must hurt, she thought, to have your name erased.

“But you knew him,” she pressed.
“Yes, I knew him.” He kept working. He could allow himself to be slow enough to think and feel everything he needed to think and feel, so long as his hands were working. “And I tried to warn him. Then I tried to protect him…” He sighed. He sighed, and his hands worked. “And then I tried to comfort him.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Like I said…” He was trying to sound casual, she thought, but he didn’t succeed. “You lot all come and go so fast. So many of you. All of you. So many…”

He trailed off. He was saying something he wasn’t saying. She felt, they both knew what he wasn’t saying.

Aubrey Thyme was going to die, someday. Just as the man in the portrait had died. Just as all of those children, all of them, had died. Just as every mortal would die. Just as Crowley, and his Aziraphale, never ever would.

Aubrey Thyme would leave him, someday. That’s how therapy worked: it was always intended to have an end. Their therapeutic work would someday come to an end, and then Aubrey Thyme, herself, would come to an end.

But it was luxurious, while it lasted. It was luxurious, and it was good, and it was meaningful. While it lasted.

***

There are a lot of words in the Bible. Even when they are stacked on top of each other, crowded up into each other to make lines and arcs, to give structure and shadow to shapes, there are a lot of words in the Bible. She and Crowley, they got a lot of work done with those words, and it took a lot of time. She was growing older, as the collection of canvases grew.

She was growing older, and he was not.

There were two pictures, from the start, that she had been most interested in. She had been antsy to find out what he would do with the sections at the very beginning of the book and the very end. It surprised her, ultimately, what he did with each. It surprised her, and she needed him to explain both of them to her.

“It’s just because of the angle,” he said, pointing to the picture he had made from the majority of Genesis. “See, you’re looking up, a little, and the view of him is obscured by feathers.” He traced the lines that composed the feathers, and it helped her see it. It was Aziraphale, in profile, hidden behind those feathers. “I told you, didn’t I? He let me stand under his wing, when the first rains came. He was shielding me.”

It was sweet. It was so very sweet. Anthony J. Crowley, she had come to understand, had exactly the sort of sensibilities one would expect from a poet and an artist.

The other picture, the one made from Revelations, was much easier to interpret visually. It was much harder to understand, though. She had imagined so many different ways he might depict this section of the Bible, and she was completely at a loss for how he had chosen to do it.

“It’s a symbol, Herb,” he had said when she asked about it, sounding like he was annoyed that she didn’t just immediately get what it was a symbol for. But then he dropped the tone, and he allowed himself to grow quiet and intent. “It’s a symbol of… Well, lots of things. It’s a symbol for everything that’s ever mattered to me. And it’s a symbol of some of the worst things I’ve lived
through. It’s got all of that, all wrapped up in it. It’s a symbol for all the good and all the bad.”

“The two, together,” she said.

“Yes,” he said, and there was meaning in it. “Yes. Together.”

It was stunning, really. It was stunning, and such a potent display of the power of symbols. It was something she could only take as a very human capacity, the ability to establish and care about symbols. It was all too human, so gloriously and beautifully human, she thought, to be able to find so much incredible symbolic import in something as simple as a picture of a thermos.

***

“We’re going to have to talk about the missing piece,” she said, one day, after she had put it off for long enough.

“What’s that?” he asked, gluing some words down, the finishing touches on a portrait of his car.

“We’ve got a whole lot about what happened after the fact. And we’ve got the lamp, for what happened before.” She paused, here, to let the meaning sink in. It was better to let him know what she was saying, before she actually said it. “We don’t have the fall, yet.”

It was quiet. She waited for him, as he continued to work on the picture of the car. She trusted him: he hadn’t responded yet, because he was thinking.

“You know,” he said after about a full minute, turning his head to the side to look at her. He sounded almost surprised, perhaps bemused. “It hadn’t even occurred to me to include it?”

She looked at his eyes, closely. He wasn’t being sarcastic. He was being serious. It made her feel something conflicted, deep in her core, a mixture of surprise and happiness, but something else as well. This was the whole point of the third phase, after all: to help him construct a meaningful appreciation of his life, as something more than just before the trauma and after the trauma.

That was what they had set out to do. And, apparently, they had done it.

“You don’t have to, if you don’t want to,” she said.

“No, no.” He turned back to his work. “I think I’ve got an idea. And I still have the front and back matter from the book to work with, don’t I? I think it’ll work.”

He sounded peaceful, as he said it. He sounded satisfied.

They had done it. They had gotten here. Aubrey Thyme felt something complicated and sore, deep inside, but she felt more, too. She wouldn’t let that complicated ache get in the way of her feeling a great, soaring pride.

***

The primary goal for a professional psychotherapist like Aubrey Thyme is to make herself obsolete. The goal is to help the client gain independence, to heal to the point that he is no longer dependent on a therapist. There was a saying that many of Aubrey Thyme’s peers used to think about their work: the goal is to start terminating with a client from the moment you start.

Aubrey Thyme lived up to her professional responsibilities. Or, at least, she tried to. She interrogated her motivations, as she thought about the luxurious, slow process of her work with
Crowley. It was clear, neither of them were quick to end things. It was clear, she did not want to say goodbye, and she always enjoyed the opportunity to work with him. Aubrey Thyme interrogated her motivations, and she couldn’t deny there was some selfishness underneath the surface, but she also believed that she was justified in the extensive amount of time she dedicated to working with him. He had over 6000 years to process through, after all. What felt luxuriously slow to her, she reasoned, would seem entirely different from his timeless perspective. She believed it was right, given who he was as a client and the very unusual therapeutic needs he had, that their work was taking so much time. She believed it was right, and she made sure to check that he agreed.

She let it take time. She let it go slowly, so very slowly. She would go as slowly as Crowley needed. She would ultimately spend such a large portion of her life, her finite mortal life, content to be his therapist, content to have him as her client.

They worked together, for such a long time. They worked together, and it was luxurious.

She got older, and he didn’t.

***

The fall was the last portrait he finished. It only made sense, for it to be last.

It wasn’t at all what she had expected. It was good, it was wonderful, that it wasn’t at all what she had expected.

It was two hands, holding tight to one another, each stretching from an opposite side of the paper.

They were stylized, so she couldn’t tell whose was whose. Crowley and Aziraphale, she knew, had very different hands, but he had constructed these hands so that it was not clear which hand belonged to which entity. There was no background to indicate which direction was up and which was down; there were no clouds on one side or pits of fire on the other. There were only the two hands, coming together as if from across a great gulf.

“Is he pulling you up?” she asked. “Or are you pulling him down?”

“Neither,” he said, and he smiled at her. “We’re meeting in the middle.”

“Of course,” she said, realizing it could have never been anything else, and she returned his smile.

***

“What do you think you’re going to do with them all?” she asked.

They had all the canvases spread out on the floor of her office. There were quite a few different pieces. Some of them looked a little worse for wear—the early ones, when Crowley had still been so consumed with his own self-hatred. Many of them, however, were beautiful. Some of them were downright stunning.

The lamp wasn’t present. Crowley had explained: Aziraphale wasn’t willing to part with it, even for a day.

“Don’t know,” Crowley said.

“What do you think Aziraphale would want to do with them?”
He grumbled, “I don’t want the whole cottage littered with these things.”

“Really?” She pushed. “Would that really be so bad?”

“Hm.”

“What was that?”

“I said, no, it wouldn’t be,” he grumbled some more, although his heart wasn’t in the petulance.

He smiled, in a small, satisfied sort of way.

***

It was luxurious, while it lasted.

***

They were sitting across from each other, in the two chairs. There wasn’t any artwork for him to put together; they were done with that. They were done with all of it.

They had finished what they had set out to do.

They were sitting across from each other, in the two chairs, just as they had spent so much of their time together. Crowley looked a bit nervous, a bit sad. Aubrey Thyme assumed that she did, as well.

She smiled at him. It was a sad smile. It was okay for them both to feel a bit sad.

“This isn’t an end,” she said. “It’s just a change, not an end.”

His lips quirked upwards into something of a smile. It was okay for them both to feel a bit sad.

“You’re always welcome back, if and when you need it,” she said.

“I know,” he said.

They had gone over this before. She didn’t actually need to say any of it. It just felt reassuring to say it.

It was okay to feel sad, when terminating with a client.

“Greatest hits,” she said, switching focus. “What’re some of the memories you’re going to take from this place?”

He chuckled, as he went about thinking back. He picked at the cloth of his chair’s armrest, as if absent-minded.

“How’s your tree doing?” he asked, as if that were an answer. Maybe it was.

“I think it’s doing fine,” she said. She smiled, and every smile today was going to be a sad one. “It took well to being re-planted. I’m worried about winter, coming up, but I’ll let you know if I need any advice about that.”

She had property, these days. She had land, far out of town. She had bought that land, and she had given her tree a permanent home in that land’s soil. She was dedicated to watching that tree thrive.
“I liked it when you brought that apple,” he said.

She smiled, nodded, thought back to that. “I did, too. That was really meaningful, for me.”

“Me too,” he said, and he didn’t try to hide it.

_Dammit_, she thought. _We’re both going to end up crying._

But it was okay. It was okay.

Tears are okay, when you are open and honest.

“The circumstances weren’t great,” she said, “but I appreciated getting to see your place. I’m really glad you showed me the M25.”

“Heh, yeah.” He grinned. He sniffed. “And I’m glad Aziraphale got to show you the bookshop.”

“Yes, that was nice.”

His eyes were shiny, but his grin grew even larger now. “And, I have to say, I had a _lot_ of fun back when you thought I was human.”

She laughed, and she wiped at her eyes. “You asshole,” she said, and she meant all the love she put into the words.

“Could say whatever I wanted back then, and you didn’t have a _clue_ what I was talking about.”

“You have any idea how hard I was working, trying to figure you out? I had a whole theory worked out about why you cared about the story of the apple, you know.”

“Oh yeah?” He raised an eyebrow. He looked happy, even with his eyes so glossy.

“I thought your sigil was a tattoo you got as a rebellious teenager.”

“Ha!”

This was nice. It was good. It was good, and there was nothing more for them to do.

“Keep in touch,” she said.

“I will,” he said.

“My door’s always open,” she said.

“I know,” he said.

He meant it. He knew it was true. He had worked so very, very hard, to be able to know it was true: she wouldn’t abandon him. She wouldn’t, not for as long as she could. For as long as she was living, she would be there for him. He had worked so hard for that knowledge, to be able to feel it and live it. He had worked so hard, and she was so proud.

“I’ll see you around,” she said.

“Til next time,” he said.

And then it was time for him to leave.
They would meet again. At least once more, they both knew, they would meet again. But they
couldn’t know more than that. Aubrey Thyme couldn’t know when or where they would meet
again, or how many more times they would meet throughout the rest of her life. That was the point
of termination, even though it hurt: it was releasing him from the security of the therapeutic
alliance, trusting that he had the strength and resilience and wisdom and insight to manage on his
own, to live his life well, to make the most of the time that was available to him.

They would meet again. They would. At least once more. There was no way around it. But that
was, at best, bittersweet consolation. She would miss Crowley. She would miss him. It was time
for him to go, but she would miss him.

It was time for him to go, and she would miss him. Aubrey Thyme reflected on this, and she
pushed her mind to focus on the far sweeter consolation: she would miss him, and she was sad, but
she was so very proud of him. She was so very proud of the both of them, of all the work they had
done.

She could temper her sadness with the feeling of the bone-deep satisfaction that came from having
finished a job well done.
By the time Death came for Aubrey Thyme, she was ready for it. She was beyond ready for it. Her doctors were too. When she reached the age of 100, her doctors had been happy for her. At age 115, they had been surprised. At age 130, they had started to turn embarrassed. And when she was the ripe old age of 146, they had long since stopped trying to hide how disturbing they found her.

“Don’t blame me!” she would cackle at them, prodding at her belly with a happy, wrinkled finger. “I’m not the one who blessed this thing with unnatural longevity!”

No one found it as funny as she did, but that was alright. Old age, Aubrey Thyme had been happy to discover, meant that she could laugh at her own jokes even when everyone around her found them annoying.

Yes, Aubrey Thyme had lived a long life, a very long life. She had lived, and she was ready now. She was ready.

She was ready for Crowley to show up.

He was sitting in the little plastic chair beside her bed. She hadn’t heard him come in--she must have been sleeping when he arrived. But he was there now. His hair was different from the last time she had seen him. His clothing was different. He was the same.

“I thought maybe you’d bring me an orange,” she said.

“You want an orange?” He sounded anxious to be helpful, and he looked hopeful for a chance to help. “I could--a hospital’s bound to have a little shop, isn’t it? I could go see--”

“Crowley,” she cut him off, chuckling. Well, she tried to chuckle. “It was a joke.”

“Oh. Right.” He got a half-sheepish half-grin. “I get it.”

She smiled. “It’s good to see you,” she said.

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“Give me the choice,” she had said, forming the words around the piece of ice in her mouth. “I might change my mind once I’m actually close to--it.”

“Let me be a mortal who gets to make this choice,” she had said. “Let me decide, for myself, where I go, when it’s time for me to go.”

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“They treating you well here?” he asked.

“The nurses get on my last nerve,” she said, feeling cranky. This was something else Aubrey Thyme had been delighted to discover about growing old: people felt obligated to tolerate her crankiness.

“I suspect they’re just doing their job,” he said.

“Bah! Don’t you defend them,” she said.
It was small-talk. They were just making small-talk. They had business to get to, but it was nice to spend some time making small-talk. It had been a very long time since there had been anyone with whom Aubrey Thyme had felt like making small-talk.

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“I need a show of good faith,” he had said, looming over her from his goddamn fucking throne. As he said it, his lips had twitched, not in amusement but something else.

“There are limits to choice, aren’t there, Aubrey Thyme?” he had asked, not really asking. “You’ve certainly impressed this upon me recently, haven’t you? That we go behind people’s backs, when we can’t trust that their reasoning is in tact. Don’t we, Aubrey? We stop people from making the choice to self-destruct. Isn’t that right?”

He hadn’t actually wanted her to answer.

“We both know, don’t we, that you have self-destructive tendencies,” he had said.

He had leaned even closer to her, looming even more over her, and he had said, “Prove to me that you can be trusted with this choice. Prove you are motivated for the right sorts of reasons.”

“I’ll accept your counter offer,” he had said, “only if you can prove to me that you know the difference between self-respect and self-destruction.”

She had swallowed the piece of ice in her mouth. They had stared at each other, eye to eye, across that behemoth of a desk.

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“I’ve been expecting you to show up for quite a while now,” she said.

“Deathbed,” he said, and he grew fidgety as he said it. “We agreed on deathbed, Herb. That’s what I was waiting for.”

Aubrey Thyme did not want to cry. Aubrey Thyme had lived a long life, and she was ready for Death to come for her. But, still, she felt the tears welling in her eyes.

It is okay for it to be a sorrowful and frightening thing, to die.

“I’m ready,” she whispered.

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“The tree,” she had said, because they both knew how to navigate symbols, because they both knew what the tree had always symbolized, because she had long since developed her plan for her sixth day with Crowley.

“I’ll keep the tree alive,” she had said. “You know what I’m like. You know how I am. I’ll take care of that fucking tree, and you can have that as your show of good faith.”

They had stared at each other, eye to eye, and he had tilted his head. They both knew what that tree had always symbolized.

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Crowley sighed. He straightened up in the little plastic chair, taking on the sort of posture that was
appropriate for a professional. He took off his sunglasses, folded them away, and he looked at her. He sat, like the professional he was, in the chair beside her, and he looked at her.

They looked at each other, eye to eye. And she smiled.

“Aubrey Thyme,” he said, as if following a script, but they had never actually developed a script for this. He was professional enough, she suspected he did not need a practiced script. “How is the tree that you have promised to care for?”

Her smile grew.

“Let me show you,” she said. She reached for the newfangled, ridiculous device that she had on the table beside her bed. It was hard for her to reach it, and she fumbled a little, but she managed to get it after a moment. “I have…” She scowled, frowning as she poked at it. It wasn’t like the devices that had been around in her youth. “I never got the hang of these new things.”

“Here, let me,” he said, and his voice was suddenly so much softer. He was, as always, so gentle and generous, and he held out a hand in order to take the device from her. “You’re trying to access your pictures, I take it?”

“Mmmhmmm.”

“There we go,” he said. He made it seem so easy. When she had been younger, it never occurred to her to wonder at his ease with technology. He always had so much ease, with technology, no matter how much it might change and shift with time.

“You see it?” she asked.

“I do,” he said, and his voice was still so soft, as he looked down at the photos she had stored on her phone. It wasn’t a surprise to him that the tree was still well after all this time. It couldn’t have been. They had stayed in touch, after all. He had offered her advice, when she had needed it. He had known already how the tree was doing, because she had kept him informed about what she had done with her land.

Aubrey Thyme had made herself learn how to care for that tree. She had made herself learn how to view the care of simple living things, like trees and flowers and vines, as a puzzle, as a fascinating puzzle, and as something more important than just a puzzle to solve, as well. She had learned how to accept the slow pace of a tree’s growth and flourishing. She had learned how to attend to the needs of a being that could not express itself. She had learned how to appreciate the glory of keeping life going.

Aubrey Thyme had bought land, far out of town. She had planted her tree in that land’s soil, and she had learned how to keep it alive. She had bought a substantial amount of land, and she had put it to good work.

She had planted seeds. She had planted seeds throughout the soil of the land she had purchased. She had planted seeds, and she had tended to the weak saplings that sprouted from the soil, and she had watched as those saplings grew strong and proud, as they reached up towards the sky, as they grew large enough to protect her in return, to shield her from rains and storms.

Aubrey Thyme had spent a lifetime planting seeds. She had planted seeds, and she had lived long enough to see a forest grow.

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She and Crowley had each picked up a pen and signed on the dotted lines. She had signed on the dotted line. She bought her soul, on stow-away, for the price of a tree.

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“Alright, then,” Crowley said, putting the device back down on bedside table. “You’ve kept your side of the bargain.”

“Yes.”

“So, I suppose I’ll keep mine,” he breathed out.

They looked at each other, eye to eye. She watched him crack his neck, regain his professional posture. She watched him prepare. He smiled, quick and sad, with pursed lips, and he took a deep breath to steady himself.

“Aubrey Thyme,” he said, again, and she could tell he was working to keep his voice even, to keep his eyes steady, to keep his professional footing. “You have the choice of accepting all the love and forgiveness your Creator is willing to provide to you. Will you accept it?”

She listened to him, as he made the offer. She listened to him, and she saw him, and she felt a tear slide down her cheek.

There had been many times, throughout her long life, when Aubrey Thyme had thought about the contract she had signed. There had been many times when she had considered the choice that he would give to her once it was time for it, provided she lived up to her side of the bargain. She had spent decades, walking through her forest of trees, learning to appreciate the life of them, the goodness of the life of them, the ineffable goodness of living, and considering what the growth of the seeds she had planted might mean for the choice she had made to reject Her when she was younger, about the choice she would have to make again when it really mattered.

She had thought about this, and she had thought about him, about her client, about the demon who currently was working so very hard to hide how much saying those words had hurt.

She had never stopped seeing him as a child, a small child, a scared and lonely child who had been abandoned and scarred by the one Being, out of all of creation, who should have protected him. She had never stopped seeing the kindness in him, the gentleness to him, the sweetness of him. She had never stopped seeing the ache in him, the deep and powerful ache to be given the very offer he had just given her, to be granted forgiveness and love from Her, flawed being that he was. She had never stopped seeing him as a young child, worthy of love, deserving of love, needing love.

A tear fell down her cheek.

She loved him.

Aubrey Thyme had learned, throughout the long years, how to love the goodness of life, the greenery of life, the experience of living. She had learned, throughout the long years, how to walk through a forest of her own making, how to accept the peace and protection that was provided by the very trees she had nurtured into existence. She had learned what it meant to be a gardener, and it had solidified within her the answer she knew she had to give.

She looked at Crowley, at her client, at the scared and loving little child she had always seen in him, and she knew the answer she had to give.

“No.”
She smiled. She smiled at Crowley. She gave him her smile, perhaps for the last time, and she was so very grateful for the choice he had allowed her to make.

A tear fell down his cheek.

“Your choice,” he said, voice breaking.

“I know,” she said, as she smiled, as more tears fell. “I made it.”

He reached out, into the space between them, and he grabbed hold of her hand. He held onto her hand, held on tight, with both of his.

It was the first time they had ever touched.

She was grateful for it, for the comfort of it, for the kindness of it. It could be a sorrowful and frightening thing, dying, even if you’re satisfied that you have lived a good life. Aubrey Thyme only realized, after he was holding her hand, how desperately she had needed it.

He squeezed her hand, and he stayed with her.

---

“One more thing,” she had said, setting down the pen. “I want you to promise me something.”

“Promise me,” she had said, “that you won’t actually be there at--the end.”

“The end?” he had asked.

She had not meant to fall into euphemism. She had not meant to. She had been surprised, back when she was so young, at how uncomfortable it made her to talk realistically about her inevitable death with him. She had been surprised, back then, at how the words felt stuck in her throat.

“I don’t want you to see me die,” she had said, forcing the awful words out. She had looked at him, her client, and she had known it was right to make him promise. She knew, no one should have to watch his own therapist die. “You have to promise me that you’ll leave before…”

“The end, right,” he had muttered. “Fine. You have my word on that.”

They had agreed. Before 11 am on her third day, they had agreed.

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She fell asleep again. She thought she did, at least, when she next opened her eyes. Maybe it had grown darker. She wasn’t sure. Crowley was still there, still holding her hand. He looked up at her when he noticed her stir.

“It’s--” she coughed. Well, she tried to cough. “Go. You have to go.”

He shook his head.

“Crowley,” she admonished, as much as she could.

“Nope, no.”

“You promised.”
“I promised I’d leave before the end,” he said, looking at her. There was a determination to him. She knew that look in his eyes, those open and honest eyes. “But this isn’t an end, Herb. It’s not an end, it’s just a change, so I’m not going anywhere.”

He shook his head. There was a determination to him. He shook his head, and he patted one of his hands against hers.

“I’m not leaving,” he said. “I’m not going to do that. You’re not going to be alone for this, so I am not going to leave.”

Tears fell down her cheek.

It hurt. It hurt, knowing that he was serious, that he would do this, do this for her. She knew he had seen so many other mortals die before, but not her, not his therapist. She knew he was strong and resilient, that he had the skills and fortitude to survive something like this. She knew that she felt guilty, thinking he would have to be strong and resilient for her sake. She knew that it was wrong, for any client to comfort his therapist through her death.

She knew it was wrong, and also she was so very grateful for it.

There was no one else that Aubrey Thyme would have invited to her deathbed. There had been so few people, ever, that she would have invited to this place, to this sanitized yet ceremonial space. Especially since she had lived such an unnaturally long life, there was no one else who would sit in that little plastic chair beside her.

She loved Crowley. He was, as always, so gentle and generous.

“You’re going to be alright,” he said, he kept saying. “You will. It won’t be easy, but you’re a survivor, Herb. You’ll be alright.”

He comforted her. He spoke, and he gave her comfort. He turned to telling her stories. They were good stories, happy stories. Many of them were stories she had heard before, and it was comforting to be reminded of them. He stayed with her, he refused to leave, and he told her stories to comfort her.

When they had first met, he had looked older than her. And he was, most certainly, so very much older than her. They had long since switched places, however, in terms of appearance. He now looked so very much younger than her. She wondered, if she had ever had children, what generation of descendants would be the age he looked to be? Even her grandchildren, by this point, would have been much older than he looked. But which generation, exactly, would look the same age, that was a question. It was a simple question, really. It was barely even a puzzle, hardly more than arithmetic. All it would take, to figure it out, would just be some arithmetic, some very simple arithmetic…

Aubrey Thyme died with her eyes open.

She looked at Crowley, now from a different angle. She was standing, now, on the opposite side of the hospital bed. (She wasn’t really standing.) She looked down to see herself, in the bed. (it wasn’t really herself, not anymore.) She saw that Crowley was still holding her hand. (She didn’t have hands, not anymore.)

It was a little strange, being dead.

It didn’t take long for her to realize that someone else was in the room. She looked up at him. He didn’t frighten her, but she suspected that he was not trying to frighten her. Death, she suspected,
was as much of a professional as everyone else in this room.

Crowley could not see her, it seemed. He did not look at her. He did, however, look over to Death. *Oh, right*, she thought, *they’ve met before*. She watched as Crowley opened his mouth. He was saying something, something to Death. Crowley was speaking, and Death was listening to him, but Aubrey Thyme could not hear the words.

She could not hear the words, she realized, because there was a buzzing in her ears. (She didn’t have ears.) It was growing louder, very quickly, this buzzing. It became more than just a buzzing. It grew louder and louder, and it flowed into her, flowed in from the ears she did not have. It poured into her, reverberated through her, filled her up and consumed her. It was a buzzing, but it wasn’t: it was a sound like the roar of the ocean’s waves crashing, like the crackling of unquenchable fire; it was a sound like the depths of a serene lake that could beckon you in; it was a sound like the heat of white-hot scorching Light.

It was words. It was a sound like words. Words, flowing into her, through her, reverberating through the whole of her. Words, consuming her, forcing their way deep inside of her, down into where her bones should be. Words, within her, making her, unmaking her, settling in the bone-deep spaces within her.

They were not a shout, not a bellow. These words, they were a whisper:

> you do you, sweetie

And then they were gone. Those words, they flowed out of her more quickly than they had come. They gave up residence in the bone-deep places of her, they gave her up. Those words, they abandoned her, and they left her with just the memory of almost being burnt to a crisp from the inside out, just the memory of almost sinking, almost drowning for an eternity. They left her, just right at the last moment before the panic could truly set in.

They left her. She took deep, grounding breaths. (She didn’t have lungs.) She let her system calm. (She had no neurology, not anymore.) She waited, as Crowley and Death finished talking. She was satisfied to wait.

Death turned to her. He beckoned to her. She followed, and he showed her how to make her descent.

***

Hell wasn’t so bad, not really. It was for other people, sure, but not for Aubrey Thyme. She was, after all, the most blessed entity to ever walk through the Halls of Hell and stay for more than three days. And she had, after all, been thrice bound by contract to Hell’s most notorious traitor: once unwittingly, once wittingly, and once by forgery.

It was the forgery that seemed to disturb the denizens of Hell the most. It wasn’t that long until she started hearing demons murmur *sigil-forger* as she passed by, and she most certainly felt no compunction to correct their misunderstanding. She could tell, if there had been anywhere else for them to send her, they would have banished her away. But what were they going to do, tell her to go to Hell?

She really found that joke to be very funny, even if no one else seemed to. *Their loss*, she thought.

Things got even better, once the rumor started spreading that she could spit holy water. She didn’t know where that rumor came from, but it definitely made her life easier. After that rumor started,
even that giant pisspile, Hastur, stopped trying to annoy her.

(She reminded herself, yet again, to try to be kinder in her thoughts towards Hastur. He couldn’t help it, if he was a giant pisspile, and he was, after all, working so very, very hard.)

There was more space available in Hell than it had first seemed. The place was just terrifyingly, tortuously mismanaged. She wasn’t too surprised by that. After all, trauma sits in the brain like an ever-present actuality, taking up too much space, crowding out the neurological capacity for other necessities like executive functioning. It was common for trauma survivors to find it challenging to manage tasks like organizing their files, keeping a firm schedule, making to-do lists and following through on them. It was common for trauma survivors to struggle with all those skills that were needed to set up and maintain a well-oiled bureaucracy. And what was Hell but a bureaucracy founded by the traumatized?

She didn’t ask permission. She just chose a storage room and went about cleaning it out. There was plenty of space available, it just all needed to be put in order. And, if there was one thing Aubrey Thyme could enjoy, it was getting to put things in order. If there was one thing she was good at, it was taking what others had mismanaged as a result of their past traumas and figuring out how to set it right.

She didn’t ask permission. She just cleaned out a mismanaged storage room and turned it into an office space. She scrounged around until she found two chairs that would be comfortable enough, some tables she could put beside each, and a desk where she could sit to do her work.

It would have been nice if her office had had a window, but she accepted the lack of it. This was Hell, after all—she couldn’t expect it to be too nice, could she?

Things got even more tolerable for Aubrey Thyme, once she got her penpals.

The first one she got while she was still cleaning out her office space. She found, moldering in a corner, an unsorted pile of field reports. Very clearly, they had never been read. Very clearly, no one had ever dealt with them beyond stuffing them in the corner and promptly forgetting about them. Trauma, after all, can disrupt one’s executive functioning.

Those field reports, they were a hoot. His voice came through so clearly in them. She suspected, even if anyone down here had taken the time to read them, they wouldn’t have been able to interpret the sarcasm that was so obvious to her. They wouldn’t have noticed the exaggerations, the very obvious lies, the sardonic humor. Each of these field reports, she could so easily tell, was a jab, a dare, a game of chicken: *is anyone down there ever going to pay attention to what I’m doing up here?*

No one ever had. She was grateful for it, for him. She was grateful to get to read through all of these fantastic field reports.

She took some of the best ones, and she used a red pen to circle each spelling error and grammatical mistake she could find. She wrote comments in the margins, joking and making fun of what he had written. Then, she bundled them up, and she bribed a demon to get them returned to sender.

Just a few days later, she got his reply: *The ones before standardized spelling don’t count. Good to hear from you. Keep in touch. -C.*

So that was that. She had her first penpal.
The second penpal came later, and it was a complete surprise. She had been walking through the halls one day when a demon she didn’t recognize came up beside her. He went, “Psst,” and then he pushed something into her hand. She took it, and he disappeared back into the crowds.

It was a note, and it was written on the most blindingly white paper she had seen in a very long time. It was folded crisply into a perfect little square, and it was tied up with strings. It was very obvious where this note had come from.

She didn’t know what annoyed her more: the number of exclamation points Dave used in his writing, or the fact that he had somehow figured out how to navigate the back-channels between Heaven and Hell before her.

He was having trouble getting a therapeutic drum circle off the ground, up where he was, and he was hoping she might have some advice. He had written in order to restart their professional relationship, so that they could consult with one another. She didn’t know if she could be too helpful, since drum circles were far outside of her professional experience, but she replied with the best advice she could offer. And that was that: she had her second penpal.

It was good to have a professional contact. It was good to have a colleague with whom she could consult and commiserate. It was good to know that Dave was doing fine, and that, despite the difference in location between them, their experiences really weren’t that different from one another.

Yes, Hell really wasn’t that bad. She had her office. She had two chairs, end tables beside them, and a desk. She had her penpals, one of which was now a friend and the other of which was a professional contact with whom she could consult and commiserate. And, of course, there were her clients, her very many clients.

Hell really wasn’t that bad, and it wouldn’t be that bad, not as long as she knew how many trauma survivors there were here in need of help, not as long as she knew that she had the training, the professionalism, and most significantly the experience to be able to provide them with the help that they needed. Hell wouldn’t be that bad, even for an eternity, given that there was work for her to do here, important work, the sort of work that left her with a feeling that she knew was a form of grace, the sort of work that she knew no other being in all of existence was as well-positioned to do.

She was Aubrey Thyme, a professional psychotherapist with countless years of experience working with cases of severe trauma. She had shared an apple with none other than the Serpent of Eden, and she had been able to look the Guardian of the Eastern Gate in the eye and express gratitude for the good he had done for her. She was a mortal who had rejected her Creator as an act of love, and she felt the bone-deep satisfaction of knowing that she was precisely and exactly where she deserved to be. She was a God-damned professional psychotherapist, and this was what she chose to be. And this was exactly what she would choose to be, again and again, over and over, for all of eternity.

She was Aubrey Thyme, and she had work to do.
Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

This is a story that could only ever work as a piece of fanfiction. It only worked because I could trust that everyone reading it was already familiar with Crowley and his back-story. It only worked because the character of Crowley was so beautifully fleshed out, made real, through others’ love and talent. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

I never anticipated that people would care about Aubrey Thyme. I designed her personality with two thoughts in mind: 1) she needed to be a therapist who could work with someone like Crowley, and 2) I wanted her to be able to slip into the background and act like just a conduit for information about therapeutic processes and insight into Crowley. It was only when I saw reactions to her, as a character in her own right, that I felt like I could do more with this story than I had originally intended. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

I didn’t expect that this would become a story that could be so meaningful for others. I cherish the comments that so many of you have left. I am left feeling something like grace, knowing that there are people out there who have found the strength to reach out to others for help, who have taken steps to make their lives better, who have done something meaningful to help themselves flourish, all because of something I have written. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

You can imagine Aubrey Thyme, down there, sitting in her office. You can imagine her, during her breaks, turning her eyes upwards and locating you. You can imagine her seeing you and seeing all of your strength and resilience and wisdom and insight. You can imagine her seeing you and seeing that you are good enough, that you are more than good enough, that you are good just precisely and exactly as you are. You can think of her offering you her encouragement, because she knows that you can flourish, she knows that you can do the hard work of taking care of yourself, she knows that you deserve to live a good life. You can imagine her, and you can know that one of the greatest gifts you can ever give to another is the opportunity to help you if and when you need it.

One must imagine Aubrey Thyme happy.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.
Works inspired by this one:

[Podfic] Demonology and the Tri-Phasic Model of Trauma: An Integrative Approach by StarcatcherBetty

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