

Shrink

SHEILA KOHLER

I walk to his consulting rooms, which are not far from our own apartment in Paris on Rue de la Faisanderie in the elegant and expensive sixteenth district. He is practically a neighbor.

It is summer by now, a sunny afternoon in early June, when I set out nervously, while the children are in school. Cybele, my middle daughter, who was born deaf, is now at the American school in Paris and Sasha at the Cours Victor Hugo where she goes in her little gray pleated skirt and adorable blue beret. Brett, who is three years old, is with her English nanny, our version of the English nanny of my youth, Miss Prior. This one is a stocky, bossy woman with thin hair, which she teases like a cloud above her head.

Now I enter the doctor's small front garden, surrounded by an iron fence. The gate clangs closed behind me. His consulting rooms are on the ground floor. I go up the three stone steps, ring the bell. A secretary or nurse, a young slender woman in a blue uniform, the person who will later receive my substantial cheque, ushers me along a dimly lit corridor. I follow as she walks in high heels, swaying her slim hips seductively as she goes along.

This would have been the moment to turn around and simply go home, but as usual, I obediently follow along. I am a second child, used to following along. I have followed my older sister around our garden in Johannesburg, climbing jacarandas in the alley that leads up to our house, sending her little messages in a small box via a pulley we set up before I can write or read properly and can much more easily call out. I have followed her down into the wild part of the garden to play the game of “doll,” lying stiffly before her and performing her orders while she plays the “mistress,” as she has done for me in her turn to be the “doll.” This is South Africa during the apartheid period.

The waiting room is large and sunny, the shutters open on the garden. There is another woman already waiting there. She looks pale, her face innocent of any makeup, her short-cropped gray hair drawn back severely from her face. She wears gray trousers, brown lace-up shoes and reads the newspaper.

The ceiling, it seems to me, is domed, a pale blue sky painted across it, with, is it possible or am I imagining this? cherubs aiming their darts at the clouds. I have a vivid image of this splendid ceiling in the large waiting room in my mind, but I will later write about these visits to the doctor and what happens there in fictional form and again the reality will be removed to some extent permanently by my words.

Dr S., after keeping me waiting for some time, ushering the other woman in and out the door—is this correct procedure, I wonder—receives me.

In my nervousness, I almost drop the book I was trying to read while waiting on the floor.

I must describe the doctor in detail, because his physical appearance is important to me afterward. He is totally bald—a shiny bare pate, and he is plump, so that he looks rather like a Buddha with cherubic cheeks and a mysterious Buddha-like smile. He wears a shiny gray

suit, probably silk, which rustles as he ushers me into his consulting rooms. His office is dimly lit by a green lamp on his desk, which casts a mysterious light. The curtains are drawn on the bright afternoon sun and garden outside.

In his expensive suit, Dr S. sits behind his ornate, Empire desk with all the gold filigree. Behind him on either side of the window are bookcases filled with learned bound volumes: Freud, of course, but I notice, too, as I sit trembling before him, many volumes of Durkheim and one in particular with the letters that spell out Suicide in black letters down the spine of the book with its red-leather cover. I wonder how many of his patients have committed suicide. This is, after all, the real reason why I find myself here today. I remember in a vivid image my pale, sweating face looking out at me from the mirror, my husband's razor poised in my hand over my wrist.

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