

SOMETHING GOLDEN

The first time I heard Whitney Houston's *The Greatest Love of All*, I was in my therapist's office and we were making out on her sofa. As a condition of probation, the judge had ordered that I get counseling for my kleptomaniacal tendencies. Since the honorable judge gave me the choice of therapists, I visited at least a dozen offices until I found a therapist I liked. She was young and self-consciously pretty, the way ultra-smart women sometimes are, spending their late teens to early twenties trying to impress with their brains, only to come to their enlightened senses by their mid-twenties when they decide they actually want to have a real relationship with touching and feeling and sexual intimacy but now are unsure about how much sexual allure to put out, so they end up as a weird contradiction with their treadmill-toned legs and low cut, professional blouses that offer inviting glimpses of cleavage, which of course clash with the milky skin that's been begging for fun in the sun for so many neglected years. And then there's the social

timidity disguised as professional distance. She was exactly my type, and she would have to listen to me for an hour, twice a month, for four months.

She told me not to minimize what I'd done but to accept my problem and then work to deal with it. So I told her about all the guilt I felt for stealing from my stepmother, and how I should have learned after the first time, and how I did have this irresistible urge to take what wasn't mine. Money? No, I never took money—my stepmom wouldn't have noticed that—but just small petty things like hairbrushes, lipstick, and eyeliner. I didn't use the stuff. I just ended up dumping it in a gas station trashcan the next time I filled up. And yes, she had every right to call the police on five different occasions, especially when I took her emergency tampons that time I was forced—yeah, me forced at twenty-three years old—to accompany her and my father to an award ceremony in his honor at the Kiwanis Club. Yes, I have a stealing problem. What is that? It might not be a stealing problem after all but a jealousy problem?

“And your mom called the police?” she asked.

“Stepmom,” I said. “My dad was okay with it. I don't think any of us realized that after so many petty thefts the charges would get enhanced.”

The therapist had this look of pure pity and empathy, like she couldn't believe the hardship I was going through considering the minimal severity of my offense.

But it's all about misdirection. Isn't that life? One big misdirect to skew circumstances in your favor? It seemed unfair. I listened to her try to get down to the root of my thieving ways while acting supremely interested. The more she talked the better. She gained satisfaction that she was solving my problems, and I responded with bits of

Dalai Lama and Martin Buber wisdom—I had noted a couple of books on her bookshelf—which really caused her to light up with excitement.

By the third session she'd started telling me about her own life, though always prefacing each story with "I really shouldn't be talking about myself." She had a need to connect with *me*. I knew it would never work. Us. It was like I was dealing from the bottom of the deck in a rigged game, but I wanted to see how far I could take it. Fuck the system. The best way to screw my stepmom was to screw my therapist.

Leave it to a pop song to change the course of my life, but as I lay there on the couch with my therapist straddling me, her nipple in my mouth, and Whitney crooning in the background on an 80s music radio station, I realized I hated myself for what I was doing, for manipulating my therapist (although technically, due to her position, she was manipulating *me*, taking advantage of *me*, and violating her code of conduct and probably some laws too). I had completed the court-mandated sessions, and it looked like we were going to be a real couple. Just before we made it to the couch, I had invited her to Las Vegas where my friend was getting married. When I saw that glimmer of love in her eye running counterpoint to Whitney's music and lyrics, I squirmed out from under her.

"I can't do this to you," I said. "I still have too many issues to work out before I'm ready for a relationship."

"Are we still going to Vegas?" she asked.

"I'm sorry." I could see that I'd hurt her, but she didn't protest. It was as if the same thunderbolt of reality that had struck me moments before had struck her, too. Perhaps because of desperation, or maybe loneliness, she had transgressed an inviolable ethical standard, and I noticed a wave of panic wash over her initial sadness.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “No one’s going to know about this. But it’s probably better that we don’t call each other anymore. I’m sorry.”

It wasn’t until I was on the way home that I’d realized I’d insulted her as a woman *and* as a therapist. She probably felt like she’d failed at both. I felt like scum. I was scum. I was going to set my life straight and head to Vegas.

When I returned from Vegas, I called her up again.

“Mr. Wiley,” she said, “we agreed not to speak anymore.”

“*Mr.* Wiley? Samantha, come on. *I* said we shouldn’t speak anymore. You didn’t agree.”

“But you were right. It was for the best.”

“But I need your help,” I pleaded.

“Goodbye, Mr. Wiley.”

“That’s it? I’ve told you everything about myself, and now you’re going to abandon me? You’re my therapist. I have to talk to you.”

“Fine. A morning appointment though.”

I went to her office on Friday morning. Mine was the first appointment of the morning, and I knew she scheduled it early because she didn’t want to spend time with me. Inside her office, candles were stashed on every available surface, and the aroma of vanilla made me hungry and wishing I’d eaten breakfast. Maybe it was nerves. I slumped onto her sofa.

She sat behind her desk, which she normally didn’t do, preferring usually, as she told me on my first visit, not to have a barrier between her and her clients.

“Before you start, Mr. Wiley, I want to say how sorry I am for what I did to you. I shouldn’t have let myself cross certain boundaries. That was terribly wrong of me...and is probably the worst thing I’ve ever done. I know I shouldn’t talk about myself, but since this particular issue relates directly to you, I feel like I need to say this—”

“But—” I started

“—because as a licensed therapist I have a standard to maintain. My only agenda should be to help you, and I didn’t do that. I acted selfishly and not in your best interest, and I only hope you can forgive me.”

“Do you—”

“And I completely understand if you go see someone else. I know that my sitting here in front of you might actually set you back—“

Every time I tried to speak, she continued her apology as if she were afraid of what I might say, though she had every reason to fear what I had to say. I made myself comfortable on her sofa and smiled in awe of her rambling apology.

“Is this rehearsed?” I asked.

“—so it might be better...no, this is not rehearsed, but I have thought about this a lot, and I just think—“

She wouldn’t stop, so I finally spoke through her. “Do you think that *you* acted poorly? What about *me*? Or would you expect me to behave poorly, because I’m the patient?”

“—I owe you this apology.”

“So I’m in Vegas with my buddy, and he’s been out drinking and gambling,” I said, which finally got her to stop talking. “That’s not my thing, and I go back to the hotel

and I run into his fiancée Vicky on the way. I tell her she should get a tattoo, and she's like, no, Tim hates tattoos. And I tell her he hates them because he's stuck in a Puritan box and that if she got one—maybe somewhere discreet—it would turn him on so much their marriage would be consummated in the most fantastic, mind-blowing—okay, I'd been drinking some, too—wonderful way, and that maybe she could get a little heart or something. So, we go to a tattoo parlor. She's protesting all the way, and I'm not expecting her to go through with it. I'm thinking it's just an exercise of forbearance or something, but she totally goes through with it, like she really wanted it all along but just needed someone to push her, like she wanted to make this statement that even though she's about to be married and joined at the hip or something, that she's still her own woman. And afterwards, she's giddy with excitement and she wants to go check it out, you know, stare at it for a while. We're like two mischievous kids, acting as if we've just pulled off a major heist, and I don't even think about it but I go back to her room and everything.

“And she opens up her like Gucci designer travel bag and grabs her bikini. Even though she's not supposed to expose the new tattoo to the sun, she wants to lay out by the pool for a little bit to see if it will be visible, but really, I know she just wants to show it off despite the little bit of bruising. And so she says, ‘I'm going to change now.’”

At this point of my confession I started holding back tears, and I saw a weird look of concern and disgust on Samantha's face. I knew I'd let her down. I'd let everyone down. I leaned back on the couch and stared at the ceiling fan whirring above. “I took advantage of the situation,” I said.

All this misdirection and I'd never really addressed the root of my problem with Samantha because I'd wanted to hide it, to bury it within my enthusiastic confessions. One thing I'd learned was that every confession is salted with deception. I'd been eager to admit to a thousand sins to avoid the one that really plagued me. I was crying now, big, fat, sloppy tears. "I don't know why I'm telling you this. It was like this rush I couldn't control."

Samantha's mouth was agape, but she quickly curtailed her expression of shock and turned it into a glare of condemnation. She had slipped out of her therapist persona. "You *slept* with her?"

"What? No! While she was in the bathroom changing, I went through her bag and took her money. All of it. It was like a thousand in cash. And I hid it outside her room in this like humongous planter because I couldn't take it with me to the pool without it being super obvious. So that night I go back and it's still there. I want to give it back right then and say it was all a mistake, and that I have this problem I'm working on...but I just can't do it. I'm too ashamed of myself to admit it. And I keep it. And I gamble—I wanted to all along, I just didn't have the money. Dad didn't give me a dime. He said Janice handles the money, to ask her, as if my stepmom was really going to give me anything after what I'd done to her. I'd spent all of my own money on the hotel and plane. I had like twenty bucks to gamble with, which was gone before I made it out of the airport. Holding onto that wad of cash I'd stolen made me feel like I had something."

"And you gambled it all away?" Samantha asked. She was now leaning over her desk, her head setting atop her clenched fists like a trophy. I was still so in love with her.

“No, but I probably would have lost it all had providence not given me a second chance. I won, I mean, mega-won, at craps. I couldn’t lose. By the end of the night I’m like a legend, and I would have kept playing except I had to go to the rehearsal dinner. Anyway, so it’s late, we’ve all just eaten and had a good time, except I can see that Vicky is distressed, and I know it’s not about the wedding, but still, I kind of ask her what’s bummin’ her out. She doesn’t want to tell me what’s wrong and I say, “Is it the tattoo?” even though I know that’s not it, but she kind of just cries in response. I tell her that tomorrow will be the best day of her life, but I kid you not, maybe ten minutes after our conversation, after everyone has pretty much left, I hear Tim laying into her. ‘What do you mean you lost your money? You didn’t even gamble! You just left it out in the room so the maids could take it? This is why I don’t trust you with money. I guess you won’t be doing anything else this weekend but hanging by the pool and showing off your whore heart. And there goes our fucking honeymoon!’ He’s a little drunk and I know that’s not the real Tim talking. Usually, he’s a pretty mellow guy, and it’s not like he drinks a lot or anything. So afterwards I go up to Vicky, who’s just trembling and completely devastated, and I pull out my wallet and give her the money back.”

“So you admitted what you did?” Samantha asked.

“I couldn’t even admit it to myself. In my mind I felt like I was actually being generous, even though deep down I knew otherwise. God, I couldn’t admit that to her. No way,” I said, shaking my head. “I couldn’t admit this to anyone.”

“What did she say?”

“She gave me a big hug and told me that was the nicest thing anyone had ever done for her. She said she couldn’t take it, but I insisted, telling her that I’d had an

unbelievable gambling day, which was the truth, and to consider it like a wedding gift. Or just a gift. So the next morning, I'm getting dressed in my suit and I get a call in my room from Tim. 'The wedding's off,' he says. 'Vicky doesn't want to go through with it.'

I couldn't bear to look at Samantha as I started to choke up. I began piling pillows over my body. I wanted to roll off her couch into a hole. "You should have been there with me," I said.

"I'm not your guardian. You're responsible for your own behavior."

"But if you would have been there, I wouldn't have wanted to take anything."

"Well, I wasn't there."

I felt like such a ten-year-old, wallowing in my sadness the way I was. I peeked out from behind one of the pillows. "You ever heard the line, 'it was meant to be'? My mom used to say that all the time after the divorce, like there was no way in any universe she and my dad were going to stay together. It just wasn't meant to be. And so I tried telling myself after Tim and Vicky's cancelled wedding that it wasn't meant to be. And then I got it. I goddamn got it."

"And that upsets you."

"If it wasn't meant to be, why the hell am I here?"

"In my office?"

I shook my head. It was the question that had been hiding in the blind spot of my mind for the last ten years since my parents' divorce. "If it wasn't meant to be, why am I *here*?"

The look Samantha gave me wasn't pity. It wasn't love or lust. It was pure, sweet tenderness, full of understanding and acceptance. I didn't know if it came from the therapist or the woman, but it didn't matter. It felt like something golden.

And I don't know why you want me to tell you about this. After what happened—you know, with Samantha informing the Court I needed more therapy—I'm very self-conscious talking to therapists, especially females. I've had to reassess my expectations of therapists. That's not a knock on you, of course, and while I've said some obnoxiously sexist things, those comments have more to do with my own insecurity than any general indictment on the female gender.

Am I comfortable sitting on this chair? I'm fine, but if you prefer that I move to the couch...