

Chapter Seventeen

What's Up, Docs?

I told Keri that I was seeing a counselor for my heavy alcohol use and it was true. I was self medicating and I knew it. I found Jennifer Hollister through a friend who said she really saved his life. Doctor Jennifer Hollister was an attractive, single mom of two kids in her early forties who had been married to a surgical oncologist. Okay, cancer surgeons think they're god, but it doesn't give them the right to be pricks, which this guy was. She, on the other hand, was a highly qualified angel. And she helped me a lot.

"My situation with my current wife depresses me, Doc," I said in my first session. "Tell me," she said in a kindly voice. "Well, I also think it goes back to when my previous wife died of cancer," I said trying to sort out the causation of my self-medicating. "Hmmm," was all she said. "I didn't deal with Tracy's death very well. My dog will attest to that," I said trying to be light. "The way she went at the end. And the burden of being her primary care giver. And not being able to save her," I was groping for an explanation. "So, in lieu of not being able to save Tracy, were you trying to save Keri when you met her?" Jennifer offered. "Yeah. Yeah. I didn't see it that way at the time, but yeah. Definitely," I said as things were beginning to come into perspective.

"Have you been in counseling before, Bill?" Doctor Hollister asked me as she was making some notes. "Yes, when I got divorced from my first wife," I replied. I proceeded to tell her about Doctor Stein and the Stein Honesty Principle. "I think that will be very useful for us here, Bill. We'll work with that a bit," she said and it seemed she was thinking about how to build Stein's philosophy into my current treatment.

"Do you think you're an alcoholic?" Dr. Hollister was initiating the conversation. "Well, I pass out more than I'd like to. I probably say some inappropriate things when I'm drunk," I was truly trying to be objective in my self assessment. "I don't think you're an alcoholic," she said matter-of-factly, "You're fully functioning. You don't spend store money on drunken binges. You don't get hangovers. You are either a high functioning alcoholic. Or, you're simply a heavy drinker," she said by way of diagnosis. "You shouldn't take much comfort in what I just said, however, because you still have a problem," she continued. "I get it," I said in response. "Good," she concluded.

I was in Dr. Hollister's office when I took Keri's "I'm not a fucking moron" call. Cutting to the chase after I hung up, Dr. Hollister asked, "Why do you put up with this behavior from your wife?" "Look, Doc, it's not optimal right now. But, I've lived a life where you endure bad times and stick to the plan because you love someone or something and then you finally emerge on the good side and everything you had to endure just seems irrelevant," I said and I could hear the rationalization in my voice. All I got from her was, "Hmmm."

"Do you think you're violating the Stein Honesty Principle?" Dr. Hollister began one of our sessions. "Why do you ask, Doc?" I was truly curious. "I think you know in your heart of hearts who Keri is and you're not accepting it," she offered. "You know, Doc, I'm embarrassed by where I'm at," I said honestly, "My two best buddies refer to Keri as my "cock teasing, gold digging wife" and I'm damned embarrassed to admit they're right." "Exactly." she responded, "And when you realize that you replaced the love of your life--Tracy--with someone who is, at best, a sexy, plays hard to get, manipulative woman, you get depressed. She freely abuses your good nature and you drink in response," she concluded. "Well, Doc," I began, "You're probably right, but the hard part is that I really do love her." "I know," she replied, "She's counting on that." "The other part," I continued, "is that it doesn't feel like we're going anywhere. Making any progress on either being together or being apart. We just stay in this weird limbo of accusations and counter accusations and hurt feelings all around. I stay away from the house in Albuquerque because it gives me the willies to be there. She won't stay in the same room with me, much less in the same bed. It feels like she is doing exactly what she threatened in PV--staying married to me long enough to have a legitimate claim to that house before she divorces me."

"I want you to do a couple of things, Bill, that I think might help you a lot," Dr. Hollister began, "First, satisfy your thirst completely before you drink any alcohol. Hydrate before you inebriate. Drink a large glass of water before you take a single alcoholic drink. Then alternate water with alcohol with every subsequent drink you take. I also think you need to focus on yourself more. Go out with friends. Play tennis. Go to the gym. Walk your dog. Get centered again in your life and don't let Keri have any control whatsoever. She needs to start making some sincere overtures to you if she really believes that your marriage is worth saving." "Thanks, Doc," I said as I got up to leave her office.

Keri had made going to a marriage counselor a pivotal issue in our relationship even before we got married. She made an explicit point of saying she wanted such a provision to be part of our pre-nuptial agreement. At one point, she suggested that her shrink and Dr. Hollister could meet with the two of us in a joint counseling session. "I'm going to bring all your texts and emails that I've saved that show your pattern of emotional abuse," she said when she told me about what she wanted to do. I had nothing to hide and I thought that a joint session was a splendid idea. I mentioned it to Dr. Hollister who also liked it. However, Keri began to balk at her own suggestion. The fantasy narrative Keri was spinning for anyone that would listen was that at the outset of our relationship, she fell deeply in love with me. But, I was some kind of emotional Jeckyll and Hyde whose dark side was somehow only revealed to Keri. I was an emotionally abusive ogre to her alone. That abuse ground down her love for me and eventually drove her into the arms of another man. This was the story she wanted to tell our respective shrinks. I texted Keri and asked her to provide me the name of her shrink and said that I would have Dr. Hollister contact her to set the session up. I said we were happy to meet Keri and her doctor in Albuquerque at a mutually

convenient time and place. "HIPPA," was her terse reply. "Okay. You can give Dr. Hollister's name to your doctor and she can call her. I don't have any HIPPA concerns, Keri," I replied, sensing the entire idea was an attempt to make me look bad in front of anybody she could. Keri was still stinging from what happened at the Market. She desperately needed to shame or hurt me somehow. "I think we should start our counseling by seeing someone neither one of us has a prior connection with," she said by way of trying to explain why she didn't want her joint session idea to go forward. "Alright," I said, trying to call her bluff, "I'll find the best marriage counselor in Albuquerque that neither one of us has any connection to and we'll work with that person." "Okay," she said weakly.

I did a web search for the "best couples counselor in Albuquerque" and one name popped up and stood out immediately--Eloisa Sanchez. Dr. Sanchez had one hundred seventy five-star reviews from clients. I contacted her about working with Keri and me. "I have room in my schedule to take you on," she said in our first phone call. "Great, Doc," I said feeling relieved that something was going to finally get Keri and I off of the weird relationship treadmill we'd been on for about three months. "I usually start with one spouse at a time, and then, and if, it's appropriate, I'll see you both in a joint session," she said by way of outlining her approach. "I think you'll have to start with me," I said, "Keri and her son are going out of town for a bit." "That's fine," she replied, "Can you make next Tuesday at one?" "I'll be there," I said and got her address.

I called Keri to tell her that I'd found a doctor that I thought would be very helpful for us. "Who referred her to you?" she asked when I told her about Dr. Sanchez. The question was a very standard Keri trap. You see, if someone I knew referred this counselor to me, he or she would be tainted in Keri's mind because they were affiliated with my "side" and couldn't possibly be expected to treat her side of the issues fairly, therefore, disqualifying them as our joint counselor. So, I simply told her the truth. "No one did," I said firmly, "I found her on the internet. Call her to set up an appointment for as soon as you can after you're back. Here's her number."

Notwithstanding the claim of a certain Supreme Court Justice, Eloisa Sanchez is a very wise and sage Latina. "My parents had seven children--all girls," she said in our first session, "The Bishop was a family friend and visited the house one Sunday after Mass. 'A family so blessed with so many devout girls must have at least one nun among them,' he said to my folks. Guess who drew the short straw. I became a nun and after six years in the convent, I met a priest and fell in love. We both left our holy orders and got married." "Wow, Doc," I said, truly surprised. "Unfortunately, he died quite unexpectedly after only sixteen months of marriage," she concluded. "Geez, I'm really sorry, Doc," I said sympathetically. "Thank you. It's okay. It was a long time ago. It was, however, the impetus for my getting my doctorate and

becoming exclusively a couples' counselor. I want every couple to have the kind of love and caring relationship that I'd experienced with my husband," she said.

"Have you ever been in counseling previously, Bill?" she was beginning to make notes on her laptop as we spoke. "Yes, I am currently seeing Dr. Jennifer Hollister for substance abuse issues in Santa Fe. And several years ago, I worked after my first marriage ended, with a Dr. Stein in New York," I replied. I went on to explain the Stein Honesty Principle and how much of a lasting, positive effect it had on my life. "I can see how that would be helpful," she responded, "By the way, I only know Dr. Hollister by reputation, but she's apparently very good at what she does. So, tell me, why are you here?"

"Well, Doc, I'm deeply in love with a woman I married this past April. She claims that I'm emotionally abusive and that she's still grieving the death of her ninety-one year old father, which happened in late April. We haven't had sex since the middle of April, which was the night before I closed on the house we were supposed to share here in the Heights. She's insisting that she won't have sex with me again until we finish couple's counseling. She spends a lot of time with a man named Marcos, whom she met in NA. She claims they're only friends, but I have my doubts. She celebrates her sobriety from abusing prescription pain pills, which she admits having been addicted to. But, I think she is still hooked and frequently abuses pain meds. All this depresses me terribly, so I drink more than I should," I almost said in one sentence. I went on for another half hour describing a lot more of Keri's behavior and acerbic comments. Dr. Sanchez was typing furiously on her laptop as I spoke. With about ten minutes left in our session, Dr. Sanchez held up her hand and said, "Let me interrupt you, Bill. This woman is horrible and you need to get rid of her. She is on the sociopath/psychopath spectrum and more than likely has Narcissistic Personality Disorder. You need to get rid of her immediately. Divorce her as soon as you can. She will destroy you emotionally, financially, socially, and every way she can, if you don't get away from her," she said with authority mixed with concern in her voice. "Yikes, Doc, really?" I said in amazement. "Really. See your lawyer tomorrow, if you can. Or, at least, as soon as you can. There are a couple of books I want you to read. They will help you understand what's going on a lot better--and more quickly," she said as she wrote down a couple of book titles and their authors.

I called Murray's office the next morning and told his secretary that it was important that I speak with him immediately. She put me through to his office directly. "What's up, Bill?" he asked with concern. "It's my wife, Keri. I made a doozy of a mistake marrying her and I need to walk that deal back," I told him frankly. "Annulment isn't an option in this state. So, we'll have to go the divorce route, I'm afraid," he said in his lawyer voice. "Can I see you today to get started?" I asked him. "I've got an opening at three, if you can make that," he replied. "I'll move some things around on my calendar so I can see you then," I said and hung up.

I arrived at Murray's office about five minutes early and his secretary got me a bottle of water and then ushered me into a large conference room that I was very familiar with. Murray came in promptly at three and asked me a series of questions. He made copious notes as I responded about my marriage and

overall relationship with Keri. "You'll be divorced pretty quickly, Bill. Don't worry. It may cost you that Albuquerque house, but let's see what we can do. I'll send you a draft of the petition. Review it, make changes, but get it back to me as soon as you can. We want this divorce to happen in our jurisdiction, not hers," he said and picked up the legal pad with his notes and showed me to the door. "I'm motivated to get this done quickly. The private equity guys want to close on the purchase of my business by year end and I don't want Keri getting half of what is a large sum of money," I said as I stood up to leave. "Then, get what I send you back to me as fast as you can, please, Bill," Murray said with a tone of real urgency in his voice.

There were three books that Eloisa Sanchez had recommended to me. Two were written by a person clinically diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder from a series of thirty books he had written on the subject of narcissism as part of his therapy. The two books were short, about one hundred twenty pages each, but contained an enormous amount of information. The first one I read was titled "Evil" and it described in chilling detail how narcissists identify their victims, how they then work to capture their hearts and minds, how desperately their victims will do virtually anything the narcissist demands of them to try to keep the narcissist in the relationship, and finally, how the narcissist destroys their targets and moves on to their next victim. I had to put my ereader down about half way through reading the book because my hands were shaking so badly. Everything the guy was describing was exactly how Keri had behaved towards me, almost as if she had followed the book as a guide. "My god," I said to myself, "and she accuses me of being a narcissist. Because that's what narcissists do. They make you think you're the bad one in the relationship." The second book I read by this author was titled "Zero Contact." His point was simply that if you wanted not to be victimized by a narcissist after you had decided that was what they are, you had to be absolute about not having any further contact with them or any person or thing that they were connected to. "They can be very seductive," the author wrote, "but, you must at all costs avoid the attraction."

The second author was a Scottish criminal psychologist who had written a book about the behaviors of people on the sociopath/psychopath spectrum. The book was titled "Hidden Danger" and his premise was that liars, cheats, thieves, embezzlers, murderers, and serial killers whose behaviors are on this spectrum are rife among us and are extremely hard to detect. They can be very charming or sexy or apparently successful and they act and talk exactly the way as someone who is not on the spectrum acts and talks. More importantly, those people are having and raising children of their own. What had motivated the author was the fact that in discussing patients with other clinicians, he noticed that they had a difficult time defining with any precision why they would classify a patient as a sociopath or a psychopath or even a severe psychopath. "I think my patient is a psychopath because they demonstrate these behaviors," the author related a conversation he had had with another psychologist. "Well," came the reply from the colleague, "I also would call my patient a psychopath. They demonstrate some of the same behaviors your patient does, but not all. And some not as severely. They also have these other behaviors that your patient does not." This difficulty motivated the author and a group of international collaborators to define a scale that very precisely delineated particular behaviors on the spectrum and

observable levels of severity so that it would be much easier to classify and compare patients. I'm not a clinician, but my personal assessment of Keri's anti-social behavior towards me put her on the low end of the psychopath scale.

"So, tell me what happened this past week," Dr. Sanchez began our session as I was getting settled on the couch in her office. "A lot!" I said and laughed a little nervous laugh. "Did you see your lawyer?" she pressed. "Yes. I did. And we will file our divorce petition in Santa Fe County court in the next few days. We want to have the divorce proceedings occurring in our jurisdiction," I informed her. "That's right. Very good," she seemed pleased that I'd done as she told me to. "Did you get an opportunity to read any of the books I recommended?" she asked further. "All of them. Real page turners, Doc. Seriously. And frightening. Spot on about what an animal Keri really is," I said with a tone of amazement in my voice. "Where would you put her on the spectrum?" she seemed truly curious for my opinion. "Well, as you know, I'm certainly not a clinician, but I'd say her behaviors towards me put her on the low end of psychopath," I said thoughtfully. "Well, I am a clinician. And one who admittedly has never personally met the subject. However, I'd agree with your assessment. Here's the thing you need to understand, Bill. Once a person's behavior puts them on the psychopath side of the spectrum, they never go back the other way without serious, serious amounts of therapy. In fact, they usually get worse. You need to be cautious about anything you do that concerns Keri from now on. Does she know that you're filing for divorce?" "Not yet," I replied. "Be very, very careful once she finds out," she said gravely. "Did Keri ever call to set up an appointment with you?" I was curious to know. "She left a voice mail. Once. She never followed up. But she won't come to a session with me. She knows I'd smoke out the real her in one session. And she can't have that," she said.

A few weeks later, I sat on Dr. Sanchez's couch silently at the beginning of our session for a moment or two reflecting before speaking. "You know, Dr. Sanchez, the queer part about all of this is that despite everything Keri has done to me, I still love her," I said trying to understand how that could be. But it was. "Tell me about that. What do you love?" she asked in her therapist voice. "Well," I began, "when she's the Nice Keri, not the Evil Keri, she's just my seventeen-year old boy wet dream. She's pretty and very sexy and smart. And did I say, sexy?" "So, tell me about the sexy part. Are you in love with Keri or in lust with her?" she asked. "You know," I said, "I've dated other girls that rode horses a lot as kids, like Keri did, and they all have great butts. It's an intoxicating combination of muscularly firm, yet silky and soft." "So, you're in lust with her butt," Dr. Sanchez said and winked. "Yep. I'm in lust with her butt," I said, sounding resigned and shaking my head.

I worked with both therapists for well over a year. Even after Keri and I got divorced, I kept seeing them. I truly enjoyed my weekly chats with both of them.

Occasionally, in patient/therapist relationships, a real friendship develops. Dr. Sanchez asked me once before our session started if I knew how to unclog a garbage disposal. "Jesus, Jim! I'm a doctor, not a plumber!" I said in response with a big grin on my face because I was imitating Dr. "Bones" McCoy on Star Trek. "Will you at least take a look at it?" she responded meekly, apparently not relating to my humor. "Absolutely!" I said and followed her to the kitchen. I decided trying to explain the joke probably wouldn't be worth it.

Occasionally in patient/therapist relationships, the patient becomes the therapist. One week, Dr. Hollister left a message on my phone telling me that she would have to cancel our session on short notice because she was flying to Chicago to be with her father, who had just had a heart attack. "How's your Dad?" I asked with genuine concern at the start of our next session. "It was a real scare. But he's much better and out of danger. Thank you for asking," she responded with a tone of real gratitude at my concern. I asked her how her father was doing at the outset of each of our next couple of sessions. After a couple of weeks, she replied that he'd gotten some sort of weird infection and was back in the hospital. "Do you need to go back to Chicago?" I asked. "No," she said, "my brother and sister live there and they're checking in on him," she sounded relieved that she didn't have to see him in the hospital so soon again. Three weeks later when I inquired about her father's health again, she told me that he was home and seemed to be actually improving on all fronts. "Amen to that, Doc," I said and decided that I wouldn't talk about her dad again unless she brought it up.

Another time, when I arrived, Dr. Hollister looked distraught. "Anything wrong, Doc?" I asked. "Well, Bill, it's really strange," she said in almost a confused tone. "So, tell me," I said in her voice and winked. She laughed at the role reversal and said, "I got my daughter a dragon lizard as a pet. They're really exotic, but completely tame and domesticated. About ten days ago a little friend of hers came over and she and my daughter were playing with the lizard outside of its cage. Apparently, the little friend didn't know how to hold the lizard and she broke its back. We all stood and watched the animal writhing in pain for about five minutes until it finally died." "Cripes, Doc!" I said, "That must have been really awful for you and your daughter and her little friend." "It gets worse," she said with disbelief in her voice. "Go on," I said and winked again at being the therapist. "A few days ago, the father of my daughter's young friend offered to replace our dragon lizard because his daughter had inadvertently killed the animal. The four of us went to the exotic pet place and we ended up getting two lizards. One for my daughter, a smaller one. And one for his daughter, which was bigger. He asked if we would keep both lizards at our house, because he didn't have a cage to keep his animal in yet. I told him that of course we'd be happy to and my daughter and I took both lizards to our house and put them in the cage. I woke up this morning to my daughter screaming bloody murder from the room where the cage is." "What the hell happened?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "The bigger lizard, who belongs to my daughter's friend, had the chewed off head of the smaller lizard, her lizard, in his mouth and the bloody body of the smaller lizard was lying inert on the bottom of the cage," she said, shaking her head. I could see tears welling up in her eyes. "Holy cow, Doc! That's completely unbelievable. How terrible for you and your daughter! And I guess her little friend, too," I said trying to be as sympathetic as I could under the bizarre circumstances. "About an hour ago, I called the dad of the little girl to tell him what happened and he asked me if I'd simply keep the bigger lizard," she said sounding like she couldn't believe the guy's chutzpah, "I don't

want your killer lizard in my house! I told him he had to come and get that lizard right away and I'd just give him our cage to keep it in." "I think you need to be off dragon lizards for a while, Doc." I said in a prescriptive voice. She looked at me and we both laughed.