

## The Conversation

Dr. Jason Bloom crossed his legs in his chair and leaned back, pen tapping incessantly on his face as he eyed the man in front of him. The man was old, his hair was grey and withering, and his chin gleamed with the faintness of a wispy beard. The man's eyes, what Dr. Bloom could only assume were once a deep green, were now so dull it was hard to tell if they were a brown or a green. The man shifted uncomfortably in the chair across from him, readjusting his legs every so often, foot tapping, arms crossed then uncrossed.

Dr. Bloom glanced back towards his computer screen, eyes scanning over the chart once more: George Summers, seventy-six, major depressive disorder. Sighing and closing the page, Bloom rolled his chair out from behind his desk and sat a few feet away from the patient. George sat up, rolling his neck a little to the side as he did so.

"How are you today, Mr. Summers?" Bloom asked, simple and light, relaxing the patient into the conversation. The man raised an eyebrow, a large, bushy one that faintly looked as if it could pass as the tail of a lemur.

"Call me George," he said, voice clipped off at the end, "If I'm here right now, Dr. Bloom, that obviously means things aren't going too great for me."

"What seems to be bothering you?" Dr. Bloom asked, and seeing his patient's lack of response or acknowledgement, he rephrased, "What's brought you here to me today?"

"I'm sure you have my chart in front of you, you tell me."

"Mr. Summers-"

"George."

“George,” Bloom said, his voice now changed into something sharper, like a mother’s voice when warning a child that they were on her last nerve, “It’s better for me to hear the issue directly from the client, it’s easier for us to get to the root of the problem.” The man across from him nodded, but his eyes crinkled inwards as if he were scowling.

“I’m depressed.” Bloom blinked at the sudden candor, but continued routinely.

“And what makes you say that?” Bloom asked, leaning forward a little in his chair. The leather protested under him, causing the brief moment of silence to be broken. George blinked a little, almost in a surprised manner.

“Well...” George’s voice trailed off at the end, and silence refilled the room. “Well, I’ve been sad a lot lately.” Dr. Bloom grimaced at the elementary choice of words, but he expected no less. The man had dropped out of high school his junior year and worked as an electrician for the majority of his life, and the only schooling the man had bothered to show up for, he has severely failed in.

“Why have you been sad?”

“My wife left me a while back,” George said, and his back suddenly got straighter, a shield enveloping him.

“Why did your wife leave you?” Dr. Bloom asked, keeping his tone soft and non accusatory.

“Cause’ we weren’t happy anymore,” George replied, and it came out as a muttering. A slight accent of a southern drawl had escaped at the beginning of this wording, and when George had noticed this, his face flushed. Bloom took note of this.

“Why weren’t you happy anymore?”

“We just weren’t.”

“George, this won’t work if you don’t participate. I can’t help you if I don’t know what the problems are.” George dipped his head in subtle acceptance and his eyes immediately lowered from Dr. Bloom’s.

“I wasn’t paying attention to her no more,” George said.

“Why not?”

“Cause I was trying to provide for her.”

“So providing for her financially got in the way of your relationship?” Dr. Bloom asked, and he picked up his silver rimmed glasses from the table, pushing them onto his face.

“That’s what I just said,” George said, the snappiness in his voice returning for an instant. He noticed this and looked down again, “She said I wasn’t ever with her anymore. She said I wasn’t the man she married.”

“And who were you, before?”

“I don’t know, ignorant?” George’s temper was not as hot as it once was, but now a spitefulness had replaced his tone. George picked up the pillow seated next to him and dragged it into his lap, playing with the tassels with one finger.

“How did your wife tell you that you had changed?”

“She said I wasn’t as good as I once was, that I had lost my charm.” Dr. Bloom nodded, and jotted down another note.

“And what made her say that?” George shrugged, immediately closed off. Dr. Bloom sighed and asked a different question. “Anything else going in your mind that you would like to talk about before we dive into this issue?”

“I’m going into retirement.”

“Congratulations.”

“I’m being forced into retirement,” George corrected immediately. Bloom noted this too.

“Were you fired?”

“No, it was a gentle suggestion to go into retirement or they would be ‘forced’ to let me go,” George said, placing quotations around the word forced as he did so.

“And how do you feel about this?” Dr. Bloom asked.

“It feels like my life is falling apart. No wife, no friends, no family, and now no job,” George replied, trending towards self pity. Dr. Bloom also noted this. George stopped talking again and glanced at Bloom expectantly.

“Okay, let’s dive into your romantic life first, when did you and your wife divorce?” Dr. Bloom asked.

“Three months ago,” George said. “But, why do you need to know that stuff?”

“It helps me get a better picture of what is going on in your life. How was your married life?”

“Good.”

“Can you elaborate on that?”

“We were highschool sweethearts, dropped out of school and got married at our local chapel when I was young. ‘Thought we were always gonna be together, ya’know?” George’s voice was soft and reminiscent. “But I was an electrician and she was a librarian, we weren’t exactly making a lot of money. She had refused to work more hours so I took it upon myself to start working overtime.” George stopped for a second and thought for a moment, “She used that

money to pay for our divorce. Never even thought about that before, a little ironic though isn't it?"

"How so?"

"I was only workin' overtime so we wouldn't fight no more about the money issue. And then she used the money I earned to fix our relationship to end it."

"How did the divorce make you feel?" Dr. Bloom asked.

"Like I wasn't worth anything," George said, now completely relaxed in Dr. Bloom's presence.

"Elaborate on that for me."

"She was the one thing in my life that I cared about, and I knew cared for me," George said. "Well, I thought she cared about me." George closed his eyes and his knuckles turned white as he clenched the fabric of the pillow in his fingers. "Ya' know I never had anyone who cared for me quite like she did."

"Not even your mother?" Dr. Bloom asked, hunting for answers.

"That's different. A mother's love is natural, a woman's love is earned."

"Do you think you unearned your wife's love?" Dr. Bloom asked.

"No, I don't think I ever had it in the first place," George answered, his voice soft again. Dr. Bloom nodded and pushed his glasses further up his face and looked back at George.

"And why do you say that?"

"I've been thinkin' and we married when we was young, right? I think we just grew up with each other, and we were too scared to leave each other. Does that make sense?" Dr. Bloom nodded and wrote down his words verbatim, underlining them.

“And how do you feel about the divorce now, three months later?”

“I keep thinkin’ to myself: Was any of it real? Was our love just some hormonal something or another attraction that we were put through or did we genuinely love each other?”

“And what do you think?”

“A week ago I would’ve said love, but now, when I remember the way we would stand together doing dishes at night in silence or how we would go to bed without saying something to the other that we weren’t really in love. Some days we would only talk about the weather or what the Taylors were doing.”

“Taylors?”

“Our neighbors, young ones I think, twenties or thirties probably. But our life revolved around other people’s lives, it wasn’t just us anymore.” Dr. Bloom nodded and wrote more on his paper. He flicked his wrist over, glancing at the white face of the watch.

“We have fifteen more minutes, would like to continue this conversation now or move on to a different topic?” George went quiet altogether, and his mouth opened and closed as if he were trying to say something but he just couldn’t find the words. “What is it, George?” Bloom prodded.

“I don’t know how to put this,” George began, and then stopped again. Bloom did not say anything else this time, “Dr. Bloom, do you know what it’s like to not be needed?”

“Excuse me?”

“Do you know what it’s like to wake up every morning and realize that you aren’t living for anyone anymore. When I was married, I lived and worked and breathed for my wife. After

she left, I lived and worked and breathed for my customers. And now? Now, I don't have any of that."

"Live for yourself, then," Dr. Bloom said, breaking his endless question spiel. "Live and work and breathe for yourself, take time for yourself, care of yourself. People don't decide your worth, you do."

"Do I? Does a dog decide its worth when it's put up for adoption? Does a car decide its worth when it's sold?"

"We are not pets or objects, we decide it for ourselves," Dr. Bloom replied, placing the pad of paper next to him. George looked away again, this time to the right, his fingers still wrapped tightly in the tassles. He appeared to be in thought, so Dr. Bloom sat quietly and waited.

"How much time do we have left?" George asked, his eyes still turned away. Bloom raised an eyebrow and looked at his watch again.

"Five minutes, why?" George nodded and returned to his silence. "George?" Dr. Bloom spoke again. The old man looked up and motioned for him to continue. "Is there anything else you would like to discuss in our time here?"

"I just have a question," George said. He paused again and seemed to be almost embarrassed by what he was about to ask. "Do you think she loved me?" Dr. Bloom sat still for a second.

"It's not really my place to say."

"I'm making it your place, do you think my wife actually loved me?" George's eyes searched for an answer desperately, staring into Dr. Bloom's.

“I think dropping out of school to spend your life with someone does not just fall solely to hormones,” Dr. Bloom said, and George nodded.

“Then why did she leave?” George asked, and Dr. Bloom saw his eyes turn momentarily glassy. The question seemed rhetorical, yet Dr. Bloom still found himself struggling for an answer.

“Maybe she changed.”

“Yeah. Maybe,” George said, and he stood up, his button up now wrinkled. George turned back to the couch and placed the pillow neatly back where it had been originally. “Thank you, Dr. Bloom.”

“When do you want to schedule your next appointment?” Dr. Bloom asked, rolling back behind the desk and pulling up the color-coded calendar.

“I won’t be making one,” George said, “It took all of my money to make it this far, like I said, we weren’t exactly in the best financial situation.” Dr. Bloom nodded.

“Insurance?” Dr. Bloom asked, and George shrugged.

“They don’t cover this sort of thing. Plus, it’s already hard enough to pay for the gas it took to get here, we-” George broke off, his brow furrowing, and continued, “I don’t really live too close to the city.” Dr. Bloom nodded, and found himself standing up with George to shake his hand, a slight melancholy feeling tingling in his heart. George sighed and eased himself slowly out of the room, a limp apparent in his left leg and a weight only slightly lifted from him. Bloom watched the man go out and sat down heavily in his chair again, writing his notes into a chart and then placing the chart into the archives folder on his computer. He leaned back in his chair as stared at the pillow, tassels ruffled slightly but no other apparent disturbance. He



doubted he had helped the man with much, going in he had assumed that this was the beginning of many sessions, so he tried to gather background information.

Regret settled in his stomach, but Bloom sat up and gathered his papers, enclosing them in a briefcase. He got in his car and left, waving goodbye to the receptionist with bags under her eyes as he did so. She merely blinked back at him. As he pulled into his driveway, he stared at the house, all of the lights still on and the flashes of a TV bouncing off the walls of their living room. Jason Bloom stepped out of his car, briefcase in hand, and sighed, fishing the house key out of his pocket. He pushed open the door and looked around, catching sight of his wife just through the hall, accompanied by the running water of the kitchen sink.

“You’re home late,” Helen, his wife, said, but she never looked at him.

“Traffic.”

“Oh.” Their conversation ended there, and Jason placed his briefcase beside the counter and headed over to help his wife. They worked in silence, monotonously passing dishes to each other and putting them away.