

THE FIRE

I have a small private practice, so I answer my own phone calls. This one day I got a call from someone who sounded like a young girl, “I need to see you.”

“What’s it about?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but I’ve been thinking about killing herself.”

‘Why seek therapy if suicide is the goal?’ I wondered. But, I guess, it was one of those contradictions life is made of.

An appointment was made. She gave me her name, Tamara Mansouri. What kind of last name was that? I put the question aside; curiosity about a client’s name was not therapy.

The sessions turned into chilling revelations. I don’t know if they helped her, but at the end of the last session, I was disturbed, because her story put me in the midst of a moral dilemma which I have not been able to resolve; I did not know if as a therapist I should keep silent, or as a responsible citizen call the police.

SESSION ONE

The first few minutes revealed Tamara to be 22 years old, slim, tall, athletic, redheaded, luxuriant in style, polite in demeanor, subdued in expression, and cuttngly hostile toward herself. I saw her silently screaming at the world to look at her, and when noticed, recoiling within and punishing herself with self deprecation.

She talked the whole time, only a few short perplexed questions from me.

Tearfully, in a choked voice, she told me, “Two weeks ago Bradford died in a forest fire.”

“Bradford?”

“My father.”

I recalled reading about the fire in the newspaper, had seen its hellish images on television, and had learned that after the containment of the blaze, the charred body of a man had been found. That must have been Bradford.

“What was he doing there?” I asked.

Tamara did not answer the question. Purposely? Maybe what she told me next was more important to her. “This was my second loss by fire in less than a year. Khaled, my husband, was killed in a car explosion before this.”

My searching stare begged for details. She obliged.

“It was six in the evening. I had just finished my daily shopping for fresh meat and vegetables in the bazaar and was waiting for the return of Khaled from work. He never made it.”

“The bazaar?” My question changed the direction of the session.

“The bazaar in Fez, Morocco. I lived there with my husband, a Moroccan.”

That cleared the mystery about her name. But now I was curious about her marriage. Thinking that that might be relevant for therapy, I asked, “How did you meet your husband?”

“At the University of California in Los Angeles, where we were studying architecture. I was two years into it, and he was about to get his degree. I was attracted to him. He was the proverbial tall, dark, and handsome. I was also curious about his culture. So, I approached him with a million questions which could not be answered in one meeting. Inevitably, the frequency and duration of our meetings increased. That gave me an opportunity to become aware of some of his other qualities, strong but gentle, intelligent but humble, prudent but carefree, playful but respectful. I think contrasts can exist together and can make a person exceeding desirable. I kept my attraction carefully hidden, afraid I might be rejected. After all, he never asked me for a date and never expressed any desire for physical or emotional closeness. Yet I could see on his face that he liked me. Then one day, out of the blue, at least to me, he asked me to marry him. So the attraction was mutual. Instead of being elated, I found myself in the midst of a major conflict.”

“Conflict?”

She digressed from her narration to answer my question. “Yes, I loved Khaled and wanted to accept his proposal, but I also loved my father, and did not want to leave him.”

“Leave him?” My perplexity must have shown on my face.

She explained, “I lived with my father and there was no mother.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed with understanding.

“Anyway, I pondered over my conflict for a while and, in the end, realized that I wanted to leave my father as much as I wanted to stay with him. This weakened my father’s emotional hold on me. After a couple of weeks of more soul searching, I decided to give up my paternal bond for a new love in my life. A sacrifice had to be made. However, I could not bring myself to

tell my father about my decision at that time, afraid he might feel rejected, afraid also that there might be recriminations regarding our interracial relationship.

"So, while accepting the proposal, I also asked Khaled to keep our marriage a secret from my father and told him the reason for it. The explanation must have been convincing because my request was readily accepted. In turn, there was a request from Khaled. He asked me to move to Morocco with him because he wanted to live and work in his country after getting his degree. Reflecting over the request, I realized that making a home in Morocco would mean a major adjustment, what with a totally different culture, religion, language, dress, food, and geography. 'So what?' I told myself. 'It would be a small price to pay to be with someone I loved, and it would provide an opportunity to delve into the exotic.'

"So I married him, but not until he had graduated. My own completion of the program was not important any more. Love could do that, make your personal needs insignificant. We were married by a Justice of the Peace in Los Angeles. Considerate person that he was, Khaled did not wish to subject me, a Christian, to a Muslim ceremony which would have been obligatory had we married in Morocco.

"As the plane took off for a far away and strange land, I lovingly looked at Khaled sitting beside me and simultaneously felt a sharp pang of guilt within my heart for leaving my father without even a simple good bye. I suppressed my guilt feeling and turned my attention to making a new life for myself with my husband in a new place.

"During the long flight to our destination, we talked a lot about our future life together. In the midst of it, Khaled expressed his concern that I might feel lonely. Why? Because his parents were dead and the only close family he had was a rarely seen older brother who had devoted his life to God and lived and taught Quran in a *madarsa*. I did not mind; my husband was all the company I really needed. Besides, I knew there would be new friends. But I became curious about his brother, who seemed to be out of the ordinary, and inquired if I would ever meet him. 'Of course, you will,' informed my husband, 'Jilali is coming to our home to welcome us back.' I was elated.

"After landing in Casablanca, we took the next available train for Fez where my husband's ancestral home was. And where an old Fiat was waiting to spring back to life which seemed to have been dormant for many years.

“I had been in my new home only one day, and everything was in disarray, when Jilali showed up unannounced in the evening. He was expected, of course, very soon but not so suddenly. Still, I was pleased to have an opportunity to meet my husband’s only family.

“Khaled and I greeted Jilali at the door and welcomed him into the living room. I noticed right away that he was tall, dark, and handsome, just like my husband, but very different from him in every other way. The most prominent differences were his long flowing beard which made him look distinguished and a stern facial expression which made him look learned and aloof. For some unknown reason I thought that a beard on my husband’s face would look nice too. I made a mental note to mention it to him later when alone.

“I served pastries and lemonade to Jilali, then sat in a chair to engage in some amicable conversation and find out more about my brother-in-law’s religious devotion. But I was pretty much ignored. It seemed like my presence in the room was tolerated. The two brothers conversed in Arabic, as if on purpose, to prevent me from understanding what they talked about. After a few minutes, I could not tolerate my neglect any more and left the room to go to the kitchen and prepare the evening meal.

“My mood was off and I remained subdued throughout dinner although socially gracious toward my guest. Jilali left immediately afterward with a polite goodbye.

“It was about ten when Khaled suggested that we go to bed. But I wanted to know what the two brothers talked about without sounding angry and upset. A relationship based on love demanded it. So I made a counter suggestion to have a cup of coffee and relax a few minutes before retiring for the night. Khaled accepted.

“After we were settled on the couch side by side, I approached the subject diplomatically by first bringing up a topic which was not emotionally laden. In a normal conversational tone, embellished with a half smile, I told Khaled that Jilali looked very distinguished in his beard, then asked if he had ever thought of wearing one. Khaled affirmed that once, many years ago, he actually had grown a beard for a few months, on a whim. I wanted to know what he looked like and asked if he had a photo. No photo, but Khaled decided to grow a beard for my sake and to keep it for a few months, just for the fun of it.

“I did not care if Khaled grew a beard, but the subject had mellowed the atmosphere to the point where I felt comfortable enough to bring up the main topic without causing emotional

tension. Leaning on Khaled's shoulder to enhance the sense of relaxation, I asked, 'what did you and Jilali talk about, not that I am nosy, only curious.'

"I was surprised at Khaled's response. First he apologized for talking with Jilali in Arabic, then explained that it was normal since it was their mother tongue. After that he acknowledged that I had every right to know about their conversation and he was going to tell me. I admonished myself for having thought that I was being kept in the dark about something by the two brothers.

"What Khaled told me was totally unexpected. Jilali liked me, my looks, deportment, welcoming smile, politeness, and even the food I served. What he did not like was the fact that I was still a Christian and had not converted to Islam. Similarly, he liked his baby brother, had always liked him, but did not like the fact that he had not required his wife to convert to Islam.

"Just that. To me it was an insignificant matter. I immediately offered to become a Muslim, but Khaled objected, 'No, I'm not going to give into my brother's emotional blackmail and be part of his religious dogmatism.'

"It did not make me feel good to realize that I was the cause of friction between the brothers.

"Still, the chapter was closed, or so I thought.

"I determined that there could not be a better husband and that night I slept in his arms contentedly."

Tamara stopped talking for a moment, then said, "I am sad because those arms will never envelope me again."

Within a moment, there were tears in her eyes and soon it was a flood.

That ended the session.

SESSION TWO

I let Tamara decide what she wanted to talk about.

It turned out to be her life in Morocco.

"Khaled found a job in an architectural firm, rather quickly and effortlessly. While he was at work, I made acquaintance with women in the neighborhood and spent time with them to learn

the Moroccan way of life. I also went to a tutor to gain proficiency in Arabic. Of course, I was always back home before Khaled returned. As a result, I was never alone, never lonely, contrary to Khaled's fear.

"We were comfortable financially and materially, but not emotionally. It had nothing to do with Jilali. He was an unpleasant interlude, excused, and forgotten. There were other things.

"Khaled was uncomfortable at work. His coworkers were jealous and resentful toward him because he was given a top supervisory position in the organization, bypassing other senior architects, for the simple reason that he had an American degree.

"And I was uncomfortable for not telling my father about my marriage. Of course, it had to be done at the time to avoid any unpleasantness. But now, after the fact, it was not necessary. Sure, my father would still be hurt for not being included in my wedding, but probably not as much as the hurt he was already enduring by not knowing where his daughter was and what had happened to her.

"We both tried to deal with our discomforts in our own ways; Khaled by ignoring his colleagues and concentrating upon his work, and I by keeping busy with daily chores and keeping my father out of my mind. Neither of us had much success. After a few months Khaled started looking for another job and I wrote to my father.

"Khaled got a few offers but did not accept any in a hurry. It was important to take his time and examine the offers carefully, so that the mistake of the present job situation was not repeated again. In the meantime, I wrote to my father telling him all about my husband and his job, about my own life and activities, and about Moroccan society and culture. I also enclosed a copy of my wedding photo and photos of my home, car, neighborhood, and tourist sites of the city.

"Then I called myself stupid, not for writing the letter but for writing it so late."

I looked at Tamara with a question mark on my face.

She answered, "I should have had more trust in my father and in the strength of our love for each other."

After waiting for almost a minute she said, "My father, while good looking, was rather frail carrying about 120 pounds on a five foot six inch frame and, possibly because of this, quite self conscious and somewhat socially withdrawn. He owned a Sherwin Williams paint franchise

and managed his business quite successfully from behind a desk. Yet, he never took pride in it. Actually, he had very low self esteem, because he felt unloved, used, and abused.”

“What?” I asked.

She provided the details. “As a child my father was sexually molested by other boys his age and by his gym teacher. As an adult he had few dates, none repeated. Even the woman who gave him a child saw him only twice, once to get pregnant accidentally and the second time to dump a newborn baby on him.”

‘Is it for real?’ I was thinking. She must have read my mind because she said, “As bizarre as it sounds, it was true. My father told me all about it when I was old enough to understand. He had met my mother during a business conference. She was a sales executive with the Sherwin Williams company and had approached him to talk business over a couple of drinks. They ended up in bed together. He never figured out what she saw in him; maybe that was her way of getting business. In any case, the experience was not to be repeated. Ten months later she showed up in his shop with a little bundle of flesh and told him it was his. She explained that after their sexual encounter she was not sure of her pregnancy, her periods being erratic always; but when she was sure it was too late and too risky to abort, and being a career woman she could not be burdened with the responsibility of raising a child. She also insisted on not having any future contact with him or her child, better to close the door on any possible emotional confrontations later.”

After a brief introspective pause, Tamara said, “I was upset by my abandonment. I could understand that my mother didn’t want to be a single parent but I could not forgive her for not even trying to establish a relationship with my father, any kind of relationship, which would have allowed both of them to raise me together. I felt abused and my own pain helped me understand that of my father’s. I held him tightly in my arms as my eyes welled up with tears. My father gently stroked my hair and told me that from the day he took over my responsibility he kept me close to his heart, did not want me to grow up feeling unloved like he did.

“I became emotionally bonded to my father who had met all my needs from the time I was abandoned by my mother.”

She looked sad, very sad, as she ended her narration.

That also ended the session.

SESSION THREE

I prompted Tamara, “So, what happened after you wrote to your father?”

She formed her words laboriously to answer. Her internal disturbance was evident on her face, in her constantly shifting gaze, and in her aimless movement of hands.

“One evening after dinner, Khaled and I were resting when the phone rang. I answered and almost fainted. My father was on the other end. My heart throbbed erratically with panic, fearing admonition, and who knew what else, but only for a moment. My fear subsided when I heard my father telling me that he had called to give me his blessing, adding that he would have liked to do so in person but could not get away from his work. I was overwhelmed by his understanding and introduced him to my husband who joined the conversation on an extension. My father told us that he was sending some money as a gift, apologizing for the impersonality of it but explaining that the delivery of a material gift across continents would be time consuming and would likely involve customs headache. He also offered his assurance to help us in any way he could, all we had to do was ask. Khaled thanked him for his generosity and kindness and expressed a desire to meet him personally someday. That was fine with my father.

“After the phone became silent, I was overcome with sadness. No matter how calm and accepting he sounded, my father surely would have been feeling rejected. But there was nothing I could do about it. I had to let him go, because now I belonged in the arms of a man I had chosen to be with. Yet, that night I had a restless sleep.

“Two weeks later a \$25,000 check arrived to be spent any way Khaled and I pleased. We were incredulous but appreciative. I immediately called my father to acknowledge the gift and thank him. But there was no answer at his residence, so I called him on his cell phone. He appeared happy to receive my call and explained that he was on a business trip of about two-week duration, networking with other Sherwin-William dealers, which was why he was not available at home. I, on behalf of both my husband and myself, thanked him for his generosity. He accepted the ‘thanks’ graciously and promised to visit us soon after his business trip adding that he already had the visa for Morocco. I was elated.

“Not knowing what to do with the money at the time, we just deposited it in the bank, but it became meaningless in the face of the tragedy which occurred about a week later. Khaled had driven himself to work in the morning as usual. He never came back. Not alive.”

She stopped talking and gazed blankly at the wall without blinking. Her eyes were dry, but I knew her heart was bleeding profusely. I waited for a few minutes, then intervened, “What happened?”

She was jolted into speaking. Her speech was strained as she related the events.

“In the evening, as I waited for Khaled to come home, the phone rang. One of his coworkers was calling. Khaled was killed inside his car when it exploded in the staff parking area.

“The news stunned me. A voice within me protested, ‘it couldn’t be’. I had to find out the truth myself. I called a taxi and rushed to the place where my life lay in fragments. The grisly scene made me fall unconscious.

“When my sense of reality returned, I found myself lying on a couch in the reception area of Khaled’s firm, surrounded by his colleagues and the police. A female employee held my head in her lap and comforted me. Amidst my tears, which ran incessantly, I heard someone relate the incident.

“The car was blown up by explosives, the kind one could buy from any fireworks shop. It was in its parking spot with the key in the ignition and the driver seat occupied. The speculation was that the compacted explosive, tied to the ignition system, was detonated when the vehicle was started. The leaking gasoline from the damaged vehicle made matters worse.

“The police asked me if my husband had any enemies or if I had any idea who might have committed such a heinous crime. I did not answer, did not know what to say. The question was repeated again. Realizing that it was not going to go away, I responded that there were no enemies.

“The police then asked, ‘None? Perhaps, someone in the States?’

“This seemed to me a crazy speculation. How could someone commit a long distance murder in a foreign country? My incredulous looks apparently forced the police to explain that it was not as impossible as it seemed. It’s only one day flight from the USA to Morocco, and all the killer needed was Khaled’s address, access to a fireworks shop, and rudimentary knowledge of car engines. The address could be obtained from the student directory at the university in Los Angeles, a fireworks shop could be found by asking anyone on the streets of Fez, and the workings of a car engine could be easily learned from any auto mechanic. Also in Fez, a tourist town, the killer could lose himself among all the other foreigners. Besides, he did not even have

to be present in Morocco, he could hire someone to do his job. And it didn't even have to be a he, it could be a woman.

“Even with the explanation I found the whole thing to be insane and, therefore, simply said, ‘No, no one.’

“‘Anyone in Fez, in Morocco?’ The police were not giving up.

“‘No, no one, just a few jealous coworkers,’ I answered in exasperation.

“‘Jealous coworkers!’ the police repeated. Then, they threw another question at me, ‘Could it be suicide?’

“‘No, no way,’ I asserted, ‘he loved life and there was nothing he could not handle.’

“The questioning in the midst of my grief was becoming tiresome and frustrating. Mercifully, it ended. Now I could cry uninterrupted.

“The news must have spread quickly because, within a few minutes, Jilali showed up. He was beating his chest and crying. Seeing me, anger took over him, and he screamed, ‘She killed him, the bitch.’

“Even though in a daze, I was shocked by such an accusation. Still, I did not try to defend myself. My grief had made me mute.

“But, the police intervened and asked what he meant.

“By this time Jilali had torn his jellaba and had hit and scratched himself to the point that there were bruises and minor cuts all over his chest and face. That, however, did not dampen his rage which poured into his response, ‘Khaled was a devout Muslim and would not convert to her religion, Christianity. That’s why.’

“At the face of it, the answer seemed absurd, yet the police looked at me questioningly.

“This could not be ignored. I somehow managed to utter a few words, ‘I loved my husband. I would have happily become a Muslim, but Khaled did not want me to convert.’

“The police said nothing, they just took notes. In the end, they offered to take me home. Not knowing what else to do, I accepted.

“At home, some of my neighbors and distant Moroccan relatives had already gathered to console and take care of me. I felt drained, without energy, and disconnected with my surroundings, so I allowed myself to be treated like a child. Still, I was sufficiently oriented to reality to know that the police were doing their job, they were talking to everyone present there.

“By the next day I was a little stable and realized the need for a funeral. The following day, under my instructions, a crowd of sympathizers buried my husband’s remains. Jilali was among them, a little subdued but clearly hostile toward me. Amidst a throng of people, I felt very lonely. Even more so after the services were over and everyone had left. I secluded myself in my bedroom and reflected dejectedly over the emptiness of my life. It did not help, and as the days passed, my sorrow deepened. I could not eat or sleep properly. Still, I kept a tab on what the police were doing.

“During this period, the police asked the shopkeepers and vendors around the scene of the crime if they had seen anything suspicious, like someone messing with the car that had exploded on the day of the incident. They had not. How could they? The place was always crowded and busy, and people were often seen working on their cars everywhere, in the parking lots, on the side of the streets, in front of homes and shops. The police figured that the person who put the explosive in my husband’s car would have been seen as someone fixing the car, not trying to blow it up. Then they proceeded to interview everyone known to my husband. Although, they checked their alibis for the day in question from the time when Khaled arrived for work until the time his car exploded, they also concentrated on the motive. All of Khaled’s colleagues provided alibis for each other which were considered suspicious. Some of them admitted to being jealous of Khaled but denied killing him. All of them claimed ignorance about car engines, but the police reasoned that they could be lying. So, they all remained suspects, subject to further investigation. One of them provided information which the police considered a useful lead. A few days before the tragic incident, he had overheard Khaled talking on the phone. He got only bits and pieces, but still enough to gather that Khaled was conversing with Jilali in agitation and anger. At one point he heard him say, ‘You wish I were dead, so consider me dead, but I’m not going to ask Tamara to convert.’

“The police grilled Jilali. When asked about his phone call to Khaled, he admitted to saying some unsavory things but vehemently denied any thought of hurting him in any way. When asked about his actions on the day of the tragedy, he claimed that, except for a couple of hours while teaching Quran to a group of children, he was in his room in the *madarsa*, by himself, studying The Holy Book. Then he forcefully added that the police needed to talk to me. His ranting and raving about me on the day of the tragedy was considered to be just that. And he remained a prime suspect because, although flimsy, he had a motive and opportunity.

“And I, it seemed, had a motive of sorts, means of committing the crime, and possibly an opportunity. I got another visit from the police. It was a shock because I could not imagine anyone entertaining even the thought that I killed my husband. Still, the police questions had to be answered, and I did, in a faltering voice and through inadequate phrases. I told the police that I had no motive, no skill, and no opportunity, and explained why. I told them that I loved my husband, never asked him to convert to Christianity, and had actually offered to convert to Islam myself, but he didn't think it was right. Also I didn't know anything about cars. I could not even change a tire. All I knew about cars was how to drive them. And, on the day of the tragedy, right after my husband had left for work, I had spent the entire morning visiting neighbors and had lunch with them, then had spent about two hours with my Arabic tutor, studying and chit-chatting. After that, I had done my daily shopping. Since I had only a few favorite places to shop, the shopkeepers had come to know me and would be able to confirm my visit to their stores.

“The police never considered me a prime suspect and, after talking to me and checking out my alibis, all but cleared me. A few lingering doubts probably still remained because there was no way of checking out my offer to convert to Islam, and my lack of knowledge of the mechanical properties of a car. My movements on the day my husband was killed were verified by my neighbors and the shopkeepers. The time I was alone did not seem enough to execute the crime. So, while the questions about my motives and means remained, I was cleared on the basis of lack of opportunity.

“No motive could be found among other friends and family members either, all of whom provided convincing alibis.

“Even though I had handled myself quite adequately during the police visit, it probably contributed to my sense of dejection because right after that my condition worsened.

“Depression took possession of me which increased with each passing day. A few weeks later, on one really gloomy day, I decided to end it all, but could not. As the razor blade was poised over my wrist to slash it, I had a glimpse of my father, leaning over me, and saying, ‘Pain is temporary, love is forever.’

“I threw the blade away, rushed to the telephone, and called my father.

“When the phone was picked up on the other end, however, I did not know what to say, and started to cry. My father tried to calm me and find out what happened. All I could say was

that Khaled was killed in an accident. My father expressed his deep sorrow at the tragedy and asked if there was anything he could do to help.

“Yes, he could. It occurred to me that there was nothing left for me in Morocco. I asked hesitatingly if I could move back with him temporarily until I was emotionally strong enough to make it on my own. Of course, my father agreed to my request.

“It took me about a month to close the curtain on a stage where my life’s drama had opened with happiness and hope but ended in sadness and despair.

“Although it was important for me to know the identity of Khaled’s murderer, I did not want to stay in Morocco waiting for it indefinitely. I told the police about my decision to go back to my home country. The police had no objection so long as they knew where to reach me if they had any questions.

“I donated all my property, including the house, to Jilali’s *madarsa*, gave my father’s address and phone number to the police with a request to call me as soon as they had solved the crime, and left for the States with a small suitcase. One of the most precious items it contained was Khaled’s photograph.”

No more words. No more tears. A blank look.

This seemed to contain a suggestion to end the session.

SESSION FOUR

Her steps firm, gait resolute, and face determined, Tamara walked into my office, sat in a chair in front of me, and announced, “I know everything was my fault; leaving my father, marrying a man from a different culture, writing to my father from Morocco, and then coming back to him.” Because of this conclusion, her depression seemed to have vanished, but apparently was replaced by the feeling of guilt. She said, “I hope for just punishment but do not know what it might be.”

I failed to see why she should feel guilty about any of her actions. Yet, it was not appropriate for me to question her. Her further narration, however, provided an explanation for it.

“My father’s home did not look quite the same as when I had sneaked out of it. My relationship with my father was not the same as before either. Oh, we were cordial to each other, but Khaled’s ghost was always between us.

“I decided to go back to school and resume my studies to build my future through a career. While waiting for the next semester to start, I needed to keep myself from brooding over the tragedy in Morocco. There were several ways to occupy my mind. Going to the nearby mountains and hiking until exhausted was one of them.

“One day my father asked if he could join me on some of my hikes, the easy ones, on Sundays when his shop was closed. That was fine with me. We took short hikes, four to five miles long, and not very steep. On the fateful day, we were on one such hike.

“We started on a trail which was descending westward. After going about two miles, we came upon a junction of trails and a dirt jeep road. The spot was being guarded by two forest rangers who ordered us to get out of the forest right away. Why? Because, a major fire had erupted in the west about half an hour earlier and was fast moving eastward in our direction, and judging from its progression, it would be likely to reach the trailhead within an hour.

“I surveyed the area quickly. On the Western horizon, the smoke was floating over the tree tops. The air was getting hot. There was also the smell of burning vegetation. I told my father that we must move away quickly.

“We couldn’t turn back, but we had a choice of routes, a trail on which we had traveled and a jeep road used by the rangers. The trail was shorter and steeper than the road. We opted for the trail, hoping to make better time on the shorter route. It proved to be a mistake. The necessary fast paced ascent on a steep trail was too much for my father who, after about a mile, slowed down. Soon we began to feel the heat of the fast-approaching fire. In the west, not very far from us, we could now see huge billows of smoke and high rising flames. I checked my watch. We had already used up over half an hour of our precious time. Without help, there was no way to get out of the fire zone safely. Going back to the rangers was out of the question, because they must have abandoned their post by now and driven away in their jeep on the dirt road to save themselves.

“My father looked scared and despondent as he said, ‘Looks like I’m going to burn to death like your husband.’

“‘Don’t worry, we’ll get out,’ I reassured him and quickly laid out a plan of action. ‘I will rush to the trailhead and send a rescue team. I can get there in 15 to 20 minutes, leaving enough time for rescue.’

“My father did not respond to the plan, as if it seemed irrelevant to him. Instead he told me, ‘No matter what happens, remember, I love you.’

“Of course. I was lucky to have the love of two men in my life, except that one was gone forever, the other was in danger of going. That brought tears to my eyes and urgency to my actions.

“I helped my father lie low in an open area to avoid serious smoke inhalation, gave him all the water I had, and told him to keep drinking slowly to prevent dehydration. In the midst of it, I heard my father say something unintelligible, but there was no time to ask for elucidation.

“I just rushed on the trail.

“Only a few feet were covered when I began to feel unsettled. Didn’t know why? I continued to run, all the while feeling more unsettled.

“Upon reaching the trailhead, I found the forest rangers. I told them about my father and asked for help. They told me, ‘We’re not fire fighters but we’ll try to save your father.’ They immediately dispatched a rescue helicopter and a ground team. I anxiously waited for the rescue team to come back with my father. It was not to be. The rescuers could not reach the place where my father was waiting; the fire had already gone beyond that point.

“I fainted upon hearing about the failed rescue attempt.”

It seemed like she was going to faint right there in my office.

That brought the session to an end.

SESSION FIVE

As soon as she sat down in the chair, she asked me, “Now that the story has been told, where to go from here?”

“You don’t seem depressed any more, so I don’t think there is any need for continued therapy sessions. Maybe the sessions have been cathartic to you, and that probably helped.”

She looked at me searchingly and said, “Maybe you’re right.”

However, I felt something was missing in the story, it was not complete. And a question popped up in my head, ‘How was it that a young, strong woman, could not cover a mile in enough time to facilitate rescue before the fire reached her father?’ I suspected that it had something to do with what her father had said to her as she was leaving to summon help.

So I asked, “Before you go, could you recall your father’s last words?”

“I can’t. I don’t know what he said. I couldn’t hear clearly.”

“But you heard something. That’s why you felt unsettled and you slowed down. You did slow down, right?”

She looked at me with disdain, fear, and reproach.

“I’m your therapist, not a policeman,” I assured her.

She relaxed a bit and said, “I think, seeing me cry, he said, ‘You’re thinking of your husband and the fire that killed him. I’m sorry. He was such a handsome man with a beautiful lustrous black mustache and beard.’ The beard, of course. But also my immediately triggered memory of the fact that my father was on a business trip of his choosing, free from any constraints, at exactly the time of the tragedy.”