

HER REAL STORY

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The author reflects on her massage therapist's suicide. Writing becomes a method of inquiry as she copes with the social influences of grief. She gains a deeper understanding of the emotional and intellectual turmoil as she reflects on the intimacy with her massage therapist. In the end, writing enables her to heal and move forward from the loss and trauma.

I didn't want to hear about it. No, I replied curtly, you're kidding. The word yes is hackneyed, but it is repeated. Yes, I will never see her again. Thunder and lightning take over as I am in the midst of a storm I cannot weather.

I recall my weekly massage treatments. Those therapeutic moments brought more than physical relief. She listened to my words and truly cared about my life. I disclosed private and secret snippets of my life with her. She was so receptive, she must have studied Omarzu's (2000) model of self disclosure. I revealed embarrassing, negative, or emotionally intense moments. Her positive and nonjudgmental support helped me open up. Oh, how she knew the story of my life: friends, colleagues, parents, brothers, sisters, students, ex-husband, new partner, and my beautiful daughter. How I played the piano, wrote stories, failed students, and was obsessed with crosswords. In return, she talked about books, movies, renovations, exercise classes she taught, strange people, her sister, mother, two daughters, a stockbroker, crock pot recipes, and relationship issues. And we laughed over people's idiosyncrasies. The world was filled with them, we admitted.

Received 29 November 2005; accepted 29 December 2005.

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Kerrie Spears, RMT, (1964–2005)

We once agreed that the demands of our jobs kept us searching for effective interpersonal skills. Communicating with people on a professional level requires a wide variety of social skills. Her views could surprise me, but she kept me walking along a blossoming path, encouraging me to be positive. Know your boundaries, she would say, just say no.

Women need friendships with other women. Maybe it was a matter of business to her, but I am thankful for her friendship. I recall when she gave me a graduation card. Congratulations, she said, you deserve the doctorate. When we embraced, I knew we were friends. She gave me a tiny break in the clatter of life through a long succession of conversations. She knew just where to press my body and how to relieve muscle cramps. Doses of her massage put my neck and back into shape. A fantastic massage from her and I was set for the day. I appreciated how sensitive and caring she was toward me; now I learn she was miserable.

A tall, slender woman, clothed in simple outfits, her hair often tied in a bun. Her voice was subdued but confident. At some point, I do not know when, we began to establish eye contact. Her sessions began with follow-up questions about my life. With all her heart, she listened to me. I bet she never suspected her words enriched my life or that her tone brought great offerings. At her suggestion, I purchased a small leather knapsack purse to help my back. At her suggestion, I bought a bicycle to improve my health. At her suggestion, I tried new crock pot recipes. At her

suggestions, I found strategic ways to resolve conflicts with students, parents, my daughter and partner.

Today, I learn her real story. Now I know she only talked about certain pieces of her puzzle. After she was attacked by a dog and had plastic surgery, she withdrew. Her friends from a previous massage clinic noticed her distance as she, with little notice, left their clinic for another solitary office. Now, I realize I never knew her. I was only her client, like talking with a hairdresser, a one-sided exchange. A mere abstraction of the moment. Apparently, she wanted to leave personal moments behind. To punish, to hurt those around her. In the face of uncertainty, the power of shrewd guesses causes unending exhaustion. My uncertain theories will not bring her back.

I have an immediate need to know why she did it. I rummage in a bookstore and read sections of *The Suicidal Mind* by Shneidman (1996). I learn that suicide is a response to psychological pain, a desperate solution for sufferers who no longer see alternatives. Suicide involves hopelessness and helplessness, and the need to escape life. For the first time, I face the obvious. Her shreds of language spoke lies. It was as though she had two lives, one in total secret. Questions rush at me. Did she deceive herself? Or her sister, or mother? Or her ex-husband in Japan? Her children? Her students during exercise classes? A thousand times, I wonder who she deceived.

Something must have been brewing in her life. Depression arrives in fleeting moments that can take over. I wonder if her life was full of black spiders and specks of dust. Obviously, she felt a severe attack of unhappiness. Discordant elements overtook her desire to live. Her secret hoard of feelings brought her self-inflicted death.

I try to understand but cannot. Perhaps I might have become her confidante who helped her walk a straight line. Maybe I could have helped. But I will never know. One moment I see her laugh. Another, I see her blindfolded. My chest tightens as I face the truth. I take a deep breath to stop my heart from pounding. My temples throb. Paralyzed, I search for poetry to purge the chaos. I wish it were not true. She was torn up inside and burning in the dark flames of ashes.

Her selfish death leaves me in a quandary. What was the rhythm of her madness? Her final thoughts? Last time we parted she said, have a great day. See you next week. I did not suspect that would be our last meeting. Three years together, talking, crying, sharing,

smiling. Now I plunge into a bottomless reservoir searching for answers. I wonder what neighborhood she is in. Probably tiny single-story houses with enormous oak trees. She liked roses and shrubs and green, green grass. I seize a glimpse of her face. Her voice echoes through the room. The sound of water as she washes her hands before my massage. Her smile when I gave her a book.

I force myself to slow my pace. Memories that return are laced with bitterness. There is so much more to tell her. I shake my head. Shut my eyes and take a deep breath. The bundles and rags and scraps of her insides. Her grief an untranslated song. The anger frothing behind her calmness. Thoughts of her become layers of paint, submerged in gray colors. A thick charcoal stroke covers her face and hands as I see the rope strangle her.

Suddenly, tears take over. No, I furiously say, no way, she doesn't deserve my tears. My throat tightens as I refuse to give in. No, not when I hurt, not when she lied. I try to cope and let go of her memory. For some people, the word "end" has meaning because they trace back the chain of events. Their minds are at rest. Maybe it takes inconsolable grief to get through grief. I settle myself in this place. Maybe there is no solution to this infinity. Perhaps she never even existed.

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