

The Distance That Will Remain

“Maybe you've had skin next to your skin, but when was the last time you let yourself be touched?”

— *Tom Spanbauer*

Part I

Skin.

A handshake. Let's shake on it. Let's agree. I will show you my palm, show you I am not hiding weapons. My hands are open. I reach toward you. If you reach towards me, we will touch. Willingly. We agree to engage this way. Without weapons.

We agree to distance, that we will only touch at arms' length for now, away from the soft belly, the heart held in its cage of ribs (held safe, held captive?) For now, we will simply touch palms, wrap the edges of fingers and thumbs around each other's.

A handshake.

Unspoken, we will use this touch for evaluation. The firmness of the grip. The eagerness (will you shake my hand once? Twice? Three times?) We will begin to know the other. Is your skin soft? Dry? Can I feel your bones or is your palm fleshy like a pillow that may comfort or smother? Will you look in my eyes while skin touches skin? Will I look back? How long will we hold this moment, eye to eye, flesh to flesh? How will we agree to let go? Who will do so first? Will I be left wondering what just happened? Will you have claimed power over me in this way, communicating dominance in your grip?

I don't remember if it even happened, this moment with Dr. S. But if we did shake hands that first day we likely would have been standing a few steps in from the door, not quite in the middle of the room. Dr. S with her short whitish hair, mature, not old, somewhere in her 60's, maybe even 70's. Me, a man of forty, just entering the fullness of my work life. Both of us White. Her gaze would have been direct, meeting mine, and mine would have replied friendly but slightly formal. I imagine that our grip would have been relaxed and firm, possibly my own hand eager and nervous. Perhaps, I now realize, we were both nervous. And excited.

June 30th

It's hard to begin, to start writing about this end. It finally hit me this week. Six sessions left. Realized yesterday I am grieving. This ending melding with previous significant endings. All of them, oddly, right at this time in the year. End of June, beginning of July.

On Tuesday, I told Dr. S, in sobbing words, that she meant so much to me. That I would miss her. Today, I realize there's part of me that is angry, and a part that feels conflicted about the anger.

"You have a right to retire," I say.

"But don't you have a right to end your analysis on your own time?" she asks.

"But life doesn't really work that way," I reply.

"It's unfair," she concedes.

Fear arose last night. Will I lose everything I've gained? Will I go back to how I was before? Become smaller somehow? With less internal spaciousness? I'm losing this place. This place where I come and sit with her or, for the past three or four years, lie on her couch and think out loud, feel well-held, open myself to her, to me, and feel received. Understood. Without this space, what will happen?

“Will you really lose this space?” she asks. I'm not sure. Or, yes.

And no.

The other morning I had a dream: I am in a consult group in Dr. S's office. Dr. S is asking me whether she should remove the credentials from her door before or after her last session. I don't know what to say. I finally suggest she leave them up. Let the building deal with it after she (and I) are gone.

I want my analyst until the end. Want her to leave her credentials on her door, leave them forever in my mind.

This grief is so strong, it surprises me. Weighted and listless. Or quiet with moments of fear. Tender and sore. Soft. I recognize my body's response to a known upcoming loss. To this transitional time where the odd goodbye is imminent but has yet to arrive.

July 6

Walking into the building. The smell, when I notice it, always reminds me of my grandparents home in Norway as a child. Clean, vaguely yeasty, like someone was or will be baking bread. An “everything in its place” smell.

I walk in through the glass door, holding, as usual, my two bright yellow bike panniers. Forward through the narrow hall, right up the stairs. Down another narrow hall lined with windows. In the summer, one of the other practitioners (the Pilates instructor down the hall, perhaps) often places a small vase of roses on the windowsill, and today is one such day. The silky, pink-yellow skin emits its soft, sought-after fragrance. I pause a moment. Inhale.

Down the hallway, all the way to the end, the door to the right. Her open door comes into view. Almost always the open door. Almost always do I arrive after the beginning of the hour. My timing has been a topic for us, and I am no closer, it seems, to understanding my difficulty with getting there (or anywhere) on time.

I see her legs as she sits in her chair. Reading. Not yet aware of me. As I've seen her so many times, and there are only a few times left. The heavy tearful feeling now. I walk through the door.

I show her my new bike jacket that I'm excited about. I've somehow become a young boy showing her my new reflective jacket, hoping she will approve of my desire to be safe as I ride the urban Seattle traffic and construction zone streets of this particular time. Danger is all around, but still I try to stay visible.

I lie down on the couch. The comfort of being there. The familiar trees out the window. Birds playing (is that what they're doing?) in the branches. I realize I'm reluctant to say what I

want to say, but go ahead. "I'd like to be able to write you, to give you updates from time to time." The young boy is here again, I hear him in my own voice, shy and a little embarrassed. "Not every week or anything" I joke, the man now. We both chuckle. "My email will remain the same, and I'll give you my address" she replies. I'm relieved.

A few moments of silence. Then, the boy/man emboldens: "Would it be ok to ask you some questions about your life?"

"Yes" she offers. I should note here that she has never been a blank-slate sort of analyst for me. I have never asked about her life but never had the feeling that I couldn't ask or that I would be met with a wall of stony silence if I did. I wonder now how she might have answered me had I asked about her life earlier in our work. Throughout our time together, at key moments, she has shared little bits of herself. All details that met details of my own struggles: driving home to her partner and being late, grad school in Boston area, at some point working with elders. Her details matched my own struggles with time, my own schooling, my own work with elders. She let me know the specifics of why, a few years back, she had to cancel a session due to a "family emergency." She had to go see her dying brother. She also let me know that when she had been gone for a week, it was to attend a meditation retreat—a type of meditation she had studied for a long time. From this last piece of information, I found myself imagining her as a Buddhist nun. A fantasy fueled by her willingness to give me a reduced rate? Or was it related to the dilapidated chairs in her office that finally became a joke for us? I imagined her giving and giving, unable to afford new chairs. As a Buddhist nun, Dr. S wouldn't place much value on worldly possessions, I assumed.

She shared these snapshots and although I relished them, I never asked for more. Never was greedy, or never showed my greediness. And frankly, I didn't want to know too much, because I relished that the relationship was all about me. Perhaps greedy after all.

Not knowing too much allowed me to keep my imagination. She could be her, but she could also be the her that I needed to imagine her to be.

But here we are, the door is open, I have asked and she has said yes. Fourth session from the end. Things are different now.

I begin by asking about her partner. How long have they been together? Almost forty years now. She then shares the progression of her life from her early twenties in the mid-70s to now. She lets me know that in the mid-70s she was in New York at Union Seminary, just blocks from where my mother was in grad school at Columbia Teacher's College. Possibly, they ran into the same flasher, she jokes. I was a young boy, about six then, and we lived in the suburbs. Something feels magical about this, about knowing Dr. S was there, only a few miles away.

I am curious, want to know. "And then what?" I ask in pauses. In her late twenties, after Manhattan, she was in a convent. One year as a nun. Episcopal not Buddhist, but still.... My grandfather, who I never knew, was an Episcopalian minister, my mother a lay reader.

I learn that Dr. S's wife's name is Connie. Like my mother's.

Learning Dr. S's story is a bit like being given a piece of my own history, my roots. I'm finally old enough to take it in, to appreciate it. Have been nourished enough to turn my attention to her and her story. And taking it in, I feel further nourished. I sense that in some way we both

are. The richness of it. A completion. The weight of her leaving is lifted a bit. Lightened. I get to keep her in a way I didn't know I could or even needed.

A life that has been near mine for a lot longer than these six years.

She has told me her adult life in broad strokes. This then this then this. And now this. I imagine someday being able to tell my own life and it will have been a good one, will make sense in ways I could not have foreseen.

I am floating.

In the 90s, my mother visited me in Chicago. She and I and my then-boyfriend, John, sat out on my little fire escape-cum-porch and drank martinis. At one point, John went into the kitchen to put on dinner and my mom and I were in the living room. I put on music (was it CSNY's "Our House"?). Joyfully tipsy, I whisked my mother into my arms and started dancing with her. We were laughing. "Just think," she said, "maybe someday you and I will be sitting on a cloud and looking back at this life and say, 'Isn't it fun that we were mother and son in that lifetime!'"

Floating now. A recognition of the roles, but also a recognition that they are roles. And we are at a time when they need to be loosened a bit. They have served us well, and to hold on too tight to them now would be a loss. To let them go, a loss as well. Dr. S and I are involved in a mutual holding of the new roles that are developing at this moment. Discovering them as we go. We are perhaps already entering a time when we can say, "Look how we were analyst and patient!" Loosening the roles so they can now be seen with more clarity.

I am not just being left, I am also being held in new ways, been given new nourishment in the leaving.

New skin. More solid, adult. Lying here on the couch I am still held, for now.

July 7th

I feel lighter as I arrive today. Tuesday's session seemed to move me from the weight of grief to lightness of gratitude and awe at life. I lie on the couch. Tears flow again. I want to say what is on my mind, but the lump in my throat is in the way. "It's hard to speak ... the thought is... the thought is that one day when I'm older I'll look back on my own life... and I'll think of you as one of the most important people in my life." I sob as I let this out. Or maybe I don't, maybe on the outside I'm just choked up with tears gently running down my cheeks. I can't tell.

We talk about the importance of our previous session. The way I feel more complete. "It's like I somehow get to keep you now," I say. I touch my chest. "Here."

She gets up to pour herself tea. I ask what kind of tea she has today. Peach Cobbler. She invites me to smell her freshly poured cup. This gesture. So intimate, sweet. Nourishing. "Would you like some?" she inquires. She has offered me tea before, though I don't think I ever accepted. Today I do. I sit up. "Just half a cup." The warmth of the cup. The steam. We both sip quietly for a few moments.

July 11th

When I first entered analysis with Dr. S, I revealed my worry that psychoanalysis was some sort of cult. That my identity would be stripped away and I would come to know myself as a darker person than I had known previously, filled with an infantile rage and sadistic aggression that I had somehow defended myself against all my life.

As I started analysis, I figured it would be very important that I speak any negative feelings I had, and started my first session in this vein. I pointed out that the chair I was in was uncomfortable. She asked if an extra pillow might help, and provided one for me to sit on. I noted that the placement of the clock made it hard for me to see the time. She got up and moved it to be within my sight on the bookshelf behind her. I wasn't sure what to do with her responsiveness to my expressed needs.

Somewhat suspicious, I had to admit that yes, the seat was more comfortable with the cushion and the clock was now easily visible. Dr. S was obviously not going to be a blank slate, a stony-faced stranger who would feed me interpretations of the underlying "real" reasons for my discomfort, involving confusing terms like "bad breast" or Oedipal conflicts. Instead, I experienced her as responsive and present, and through her responsiveness, began to experience myself as having a reasonable need to feel comfortable in her office. In hindsight, I see I was indeed worried Dr. S would be a bad nurturer. I likely recognized, with discomfort, my vulnerability in this asymmetrical situation and defended against it by trying to have more control over her office. What I wasn't prepared for, however, was to recognize my own fears as reasonable, worthy of response.

What I also wasn't prepared for was a journey in which my relationship with this woman would bring me to love myself in new ways. That I would come to experience myself with less shame. Would come to see, again and again, that my needs are in fact reasonable, even when I am not able to fully meet them.

Once, I arrived a bit earlier than my customary 5-10 minutes late. (I recently calculated that if I missed 5 minutes of each session on average, I have missed out on over six months of twice-weekly analysis over the course of our six years together. And why? Alas, there are still mysteries about my own behavior.) I found Dr. S putting the extra cushion on my seat and moving the clock to its place behind her chair on the bookshelf where she had moved it that first week two years earlier. I was shocked. "You move these things just for me, every time we meet?"

"Yes" she replied.

Softness. Being tended to. A new way of seeing. Comfort in actually not having changed Dr. S or her office. She was tending to my needs in ways I didn't even know, holding me in mind so I could relax.

July 12th

My mind has been moving around all morning. I finally came to realize that this agitation and vague depression is related to this being my last week with Dr. S. There's something unreal about this. Will I ever see her again after Thursday? I am beginning to realize it is unlikely. I will write. Perhaps she will respond. But I will likely never be in her presence again. As I write this, I

realize the truth of it. It is not a thought I've had consciously until this pen flowed across the paper.

I get ready, get on my bike. I arrive early. We laugh as she opens the door and I am standing there at the ready.

I tell Dr. S about my writing yesterday. About the beginning of our work, about her therapeutic jujutsu, finding myself landing in a comfortable seat. Having steeled myself for the beating I was sure analysis entailed, I had been completely unprepared for the accommodation and responses that would help me love myself in places and ways I had not yet known. Responses that allowed me to trust this process and relationship. Be less defended. Freer.

We are approaching the end of the hour. I will see her Thursday and then not again. "I had wanted to bring you a gift for our last session," I share, "something deeply meaningful. But I don't have one." I haven't been able to imagine something fitting.

"As if our time itself hasn't been the gift," she replies.

"This has been so rich," I say.

"It goes both ways," she says. "You have brought your world in here and it has enriched mine."

I feel the places in me that don't want to take this in. Can't tolerate being so seen, being so ... yes, being so loved. I let her know this. I tell her I am reminded of a camping trip in high school. A professionally led trip in which we rappelled off a cliff. The cliff wall was concave, so

we only had our feet against it for the first forty feet of the two hundred foot drop. The rest was free hanging. I remember this part vividly, hanging freely from a rope one hundred and fifty feet in the air and finding myself beginning to turn around, facing the vast expanse of the valley. I was awed and terrified. I knew I could close my eyes and feel comfort, but then I would miss this opportunity to experience this thing I had come here to experience. I kept my eyes open, breathed deep and took in the beauty.

So here, in Dr. S's office my feet are no longer moored to the cliff wall. We are hanging freely now, secured by the relationship we have developed. And the spaciousness of love is here between us, awesome and scary. I breathe deep and open my eyes to look into her face.

July 14th

The broken heart that grows fuller
stronger
life finds its way

grows up through cracks in pavement if allowed, if not
stopped
tell me this

how water shapes granite
how a blade of grass
tender green flesh finding the
opening
toward light
breakdown of the perfect
hard
skin
civilized surfaces of streets and sidewalks allowing life unexpected
wild

Our last session. The hug. I hold on, sobbing.

"I love you so," she tells me. My heart breaks open.

"I love you too," I say, the container now bigger, now able to open—broken open like my heart.

Have we ever touched before? I don't remember, though I imagine there was that handshake that first session. I imagine there was a touch, a reaching out, comfort in its implied connection and boundary, although what type of connection was not yet known. Was yet to be discovered.

Between the bookends of the handshake and the embrace have been six years of holding.

I want words to be arranged in just the right way to convey what this has been, this time with Dr. S. I'm not sure they can.

Six years is a long time. Six years is also a blip.

Our last hour. We talk about our work together and about the future. About my dreams of attending analytic training, and my hope to participate in creating new venues for psychoanalytic thought to tend to the collective broken places in our society and world.

Possibility. And heartbreak. Both.

The tears and gratitude, hope and excitement meld. What now?

I am unraveling. There's something terrifying and freeing about structures being opened.
How to hold on when the earth is shaking?

She said, "I love you so." She said that. And I said, "I love you too." I said that. The mutual blessing.

Last year, my father called on my birthday. Somewhere in the conversation there was a pause. "I'm so proud of you," he said. "You've created a good life. You've been such a good son." A heart-breaking-open-wider gift, receiving my father's blessing.

What emerged after that call surprised me. The realization that he, too, might long for my blessing. To be acknowledged. Set free?

On his birthday, a month later, I called him.

"*En god far*" were the words I used, Norwegian being the language we use most in our conversations. A good father. He let me know it was good to hear. "You don't always know whether you're doing it right, making the right decision." In giving my father my blessing I had given myself a chance to know him more as a man himself. A whole life apart from mine.

"I love you too." I now know I am not the only recipient and holder of gratitude for the other.

A session several years ago: I was talking about my mother. I don't recall what I was saying exactly, but at a pause in my wandering description Dr. S said, "Ah, that mother's loving gaze. So important!"

My body responded first. A soft sudden weeping. "I don't really know why I'm crying right now. I'm so moved... to hear you say that... it's like I suddenly feel the truth of it, the way my mother's gaze was there, loving me, all along. The way it has shaped my whole life."

It has shaped my whole life.

Like Dr. S- her gaze, her loving attention shaped me. I am so grateful.

Part II

January 15th

It is just under six months since my last session with Dr. S. I find myself in the odd position of looking for a new analyst in preparation for my own analytic training that will start, I hope, in the fall. I am not sure I'm ready to start, but aim to be by summer or early fall. Dr. J is full anyway, but he agreed to see me when a slot opened up due to a cancellation. A chance to meet and see if this would be a good fit.

I arrive a few minutes early. (Will I be early with my next analyst?) Waiting. Maybe this feeling is why I arrive late so much. Avoiding the waiting. Avoiding being the sitting duck, exposed to all who walk by. He arrives at the appointed hour and greets me in the waiting room. He doesn't look as I expected. From his calm and deep voice, I had fantasized a man who would become my loverfatherbrother. My mentor. There is, I realize, an erotic spark in this fantasy, though I have not filled it out or spent much time with it. The loverfatherbrother mentor would incite in me a sense of being warmly accepted. Even, I suppose if I am to be honest with myself, a man who would spark this feeling of acceptance with a tinge of erotic awakening or aliveness

—shallow as this is, or as a part of me thinks it is. The moment he greets me, my thoughts say, “But you’re not my father.” Not my actual father, mind you, but something more like an archetype. I have been playing in my mind for the past week, imagining my search for an analyst to be something like the ugly duckling searching for his lost mother, asking the various characters, “Are you my mother?” until he finds home. Dr. J’s face is not cold, but it doesn’t transmit warmth. Is the new father a blank slate? I can already feel the anxiety this lack of social convention evokes in me.

He shows me into his office, a long, somewhat narrow space with a bank of windows facing west, and, I imagine, a beautiful view of the mountains and water. But the windows are high on the wall and don’t offer me this scenery. Before me, against the wall with the high windows, is a couch, soft and light brown. The one end up, the other down, made into a type of chaise or divan. In addition to the couch are two chairs, one to the left facing the couch and one to the right at the head of the couch.

“Where should I sit?” I ask.

“Wherever you would like,” he responds.

I take the chair to the left. A leather “stressless,” very similar to the chair I use in my own office. As I sit, I realize his chair is on the far end of the couch, 12-14 feet away from me. I hesitate a moment. Will he move his chair closer? I consider briefly moving my own chair, but this seems rude considering I am in his space and uncertain of the set-up. I realize this is simply the distance that will remain. It feels almost comical, but he is already sitting, his face calm, expectant. I very much desire to be a bit closer, to have his face break out into a smile of recognition at the comical distance. It doesn’t.

I am being scrutinized. Wait, is that true? I look again. No, he is simply waiting. I judge him and his blank slate look, the studied expression, I am sure, of an analyst. Is this what psychoanalytic training has done to him? Does he even have anything on the wall? I try to imagine him in another setting, a party or making love. Does he laugh, express passion? I bet not.

We are two minutes into our allotted fifty.

An observing part of me is silently amazed at how much goes on in meeting a new therapist. We have gone from the waiting area to the office to choosing a seat and being quiet for a moment. Outwardly we've hardly started, but I am well under way.

I'm struck by how easy it is to talk about myself once I get started, given space and an attentive other. I talk about my past year, about the ending of my previous analysis. We acknowledge that it ended due to no choice of my own. This theme of unplanned change in my life emerges as a thread connecting the parts of history with my current life. My move from Norway to New York at age 14, my move from DC to Chicago at 23, the cancellation of the plan for a Relational Psychoanalytic program in Seattle and the end of my analysis last summer. In contrast are the huge decisions that have been solely mine: moving to Seattle at 31 and deciding to apply for psychoanalytic training at the National Institute for the Psychotherapies in New York at 45.

As we talk, my eyes meander around the office, his desk behind his chair, the windows high on the wall. I am vaguely aware of what I see. I slowly become conscious of a small object under the couch. It is a square, only about an inch or two wide. Black, with what looks like broken glass. A digital watch, its glass broken and scattered? Does he know this is below the

couch? As I continue to talk about my life and history, a different part of my mind, more image and feeling than word, runs in the background: *A socked foot hitting glass as a patient gets up from the couch. The shard effortlessly slipping past skin's protection, gently slicing through. It would not announce itself, at least not at first. The unsuspecting patient would not know they had been invaded by the foreign object. They would not know until the point of sharp sensation, an irritation slowly working its way further in as they stand and begin to move.*

Our time is almost up. We have had a good talk, really, and I have a positive experience of his ability to listen and to help me make connections. I was surprised at what came up in the themes of ending and agency or lack thereof. Decisions. Integration. And we've addressed the possibility of working together, discussed time and money and the logistics of using insurance or not. I finally become fully conscious of my curiosity about what is under the couch, aware suddenly that it is likely not what I have imagined.

"What is that, under the couch?"

"You see something under the couch?" he asks. Such a psychoanalyst, replying to a question with a question.

"Yes, there." I look closer, really looking at it now. I see it is a shiny black ant trap, the edges catching the light in shards. "It looked like a digital watch that was broken, surrounded by glass." As the words leave my mouth I realize, somewhat embarrassed, how psychoanalytic this sounds, wide open for interpretation, my unconscious producing a slightly dangerous broken clock. It's time stopped and shattered. Now useless and menacing. I give voice to this thought.

"Yikes, I realize how psychoanalytically interpretable that sounds." I say. I feel myself blush.

“There’s a lot that comes up just by coming in here,” he notes. His response and calm demeanor is now comforting, letting me know that yes, if we were to work together it may be important and valuable to explore experiences like the image of the clock, but that they are perfectly welcomed, and that the exploration will be something we both do, not something done to me.

I leave the session unsettled in ways I don’t completely understand, surprised at the many and conflicted feelings swirling. Excited, wanting the session to continue, a vague longing for the space I was just in. And simultaneously feeling overwhelmed, inadequate as a therapist, exposed and vulnerable.

That night I dream I am on a boat. I dive into the water, my exposed skin aware of vague danger. I am in the ocean, and I know this is not my element. I am a foreigner in this place, a visitor. I will always be a visitor, will always need to be on the surface to survive, only dipping down deeper with the aid of bits of the surface taken with me. My skin broadcasts my vulnerability. There is a presence here, moving in ways I cannot, unseen but felt. It comes close. Am I cuddling it? It is playful. Or hungry? I need to get back into the boat, and must do so slowly, carefully.