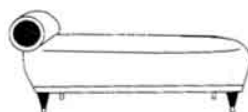


## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Joel Bergman

## The Bride Wore a Tuxedo, the Groom Wore a Gown

*As one of the significant figures in developing brief approaches to family therapy, Joel Bergman has been instrumental in training therapists for the past thirty years. He is provocative, playful, and characteristic of his New York City roots, quite challenging when inviting his clients to consider the question, "Why are you here?" After people then proceed to tell the story of what they see their problems are, Bergman will persist in asking that question over and over again until they get the point that there are multiple ways of looking at their situations and many different ways of framing what is wrong.*

*In Bergman's classic book, Fishing for Barracuda, he plots the systematic, strategic ways that therapists can produce lasting changes in relatively short periods. For the last decade he has concentrated on producing training videos for therapists that demonstrate creative, evocative ways to help people.*

*Bergman is a psychologist in private practice in Manhattan.*

This interview went a little differently than the others. Because one of the qualities that made this case so memorable to Bergman was the repartee and dialogue that took place with his client, he took the time to recreate the conversations as they occurred. The first part of this chapter is thus written in the first person as Bergman described what happened.

Bergman began the description of his most memorable case by saying that his client, James, was initially pretty skeptical that therapy could help. Nevertheless, he was so panic-stricken that he called for an appointment. Bergman began by asking his favorite question: "Why are you here, and how do think I can help you?"

"Well," James replied, "I'm here for a couple of reasons. What really scares me most is the possibility of my girlfriend leaving me. I'm afraid that one day she'll come home when I'm not expecting her. She will be so repulsed by what she sees that she'll leave me."

"What will she see?" I asked, wondering myself what he had in mind.

"I'm ashamed to tell you," James mumbled as he lowered his head. "I'm afraid you'll laugh."

"I only laugh when something is *very* funny."

"Well it's not funny at all. In fact, it's rather sick, and I don't understand it," James trailed off. With genuine anguish he looked up at me and added, "But I can't help myself."

"Try me."

James nodded, knowing that this was inevitable. "I keep a box of women's clothes hidden on the top shelf of my bedroom closet. Every once in a while, when my girlfriend Jennie leaves the apartment, I dress up as a woman. I put on women's panties, a bra, a blouse, makeup, a skirt, high heels, earrings, perfume—the whole bit."

"And then what?"

"I make believe I'm this gorgeous babe and prance around my bedroom admiring myself in the mirror."

I nodded casually and urged him to continue.

"You see, the problem is that to arouse myself even more, I take it a step further and tie myself tightly into a chair."

I tried hard not to smile. I hear wonderful stories each day in my practice, but I had never heard anything like this before. Naturally I was curious. I was also trying to picture how technically James was able to tie himself tightly into his chair.

“So,” I prompted him with a straight face. “So what’s the problem?”

James looked at me indignantly, shaking his head. He was wondering if I was a notch crazier than he was. In a slightly shrill voice, he said, “What do you mean what’s the problem? If Jennie walks in and finds me in a dress, tied up in a chair, she’ll think I’m some kind of pervert. She’ll leave me for sure,” he added in a pitiful voice.

“So,” I suggested innocently, “why don’t you lock the bedroom door when you’re doing your thing?”

Again James gave me a puzzled look. When he could see that I was serious, he pleaded the obvious. “Then she’ll ask why the bedroom door was locked.”

“Well then,” I quipped, “why don’t you tell her you’re tied up for the moment, and you’ll be with her shortly.”

### MOTHER’S PHONE CALLS

James expected me to react the same way he feared Jennie would—with revulsion and rejection. But I was more curious than put off by his behavior. I wondered what this compulsion was really about.

As I learned more about James’s childhood, his behavior began to make a lot more sense. He was a very gifted violinist, a prodigy in fact, whose natural talent, hard work, and an ambitious mother led him to enjoy a distinguished musical career.

“From as far back as I can remember,” James explained, “I’ve been the sole focus of my mother’s life. She wanted me to become a great violinist. As an only child, I was doted upon and sent to the best conservatories. My mother bought me the finest violins, hired the most gifted teachers, and made all the right moves to further my career. She attends all my concerts—even the world tours—and remains my biggest fan.

“She’s been there for me whenever I’ve needed her. She’s always showering me with expensive clothing, birthday and Christmas presents, as well as those little gifts she thinks will touch me.”

“Sounds like a pretty terrific mother to me,” I agreed.

“Well,” James quickly interjects, “it wasn’t all that terrific. Throughout my childhood, she’d confide in me about her own problems, and I listened for hours because no one else did. She divorced my father when I was five, and she never stopped complaining about how miserable he made her. I believed pretty much whatever she told me about

him until my father and I began seeing each other again when I was around twenty-five.”

Talking about his mother in this way reminded James of some of the intrusive things she would do to control every facet of his life.

“My mother would constantly burst into my bedroom without knocking. When I was ten, I put a lock on my door. She was insulted by that, so she removed it claiming that she wouldn’t be able to get into my room in case of an emergency. Come on! What kind of emergencies do ten-year-olds have? Every night she’d lay out my clothes for the next day because she wanted me to have a certain look.

“She was critical of my friends to the point where I became isolated and lonely. For years we were the only people in each other’s lives.”

James hesitates for a moment, then adds with embarrassment, “It felt like we were more like husband and wife than mother and son.”

“When did things change?” I asked him, trying to get him to elaborate more on this enmeshed relationship with his mother.

“Things changed after I moved to New York to play with the orchestra. Mother became morose and even more needy. For the past six months now, she’s become impossible. Ever since Jennie moved in with me three months ago, my mother has turned into an absolute terror. I get frightened when she tells me she has nothing more to live for. She calls me two or three times a week, sometimes in the middle of the night, complaining that she’s scared or can’t sleep. When Jennie picks up the phone, my mother hangs up. Jennie now thinks I’m having an affair.”

Again stating the obvious, I asked him, “Why don’t you ask her to stop calling in the middle of the night? Maybe you could gently suggest that she see a psychotherapist.”

“She’s already in therapy and on *Prozac*.”

“Well then,” I tried again, “what about saying that these phone calls are frightening you?”

“I can’t do that. That’s too cruel and selfish. I’m the only one who cares about her. If I turned my back on her now, there would be no one. I’m afraid if I’m not there for her when she needs me, she’ll do herself in, and then I’ll feel guilty about that the rest of my life.”

“What about asking your relatives for help?” I suggested as another option. In my style of therapy, it was not so much giving advice as looking for some kind of leverage to change this unhappy pattern. It is always interesting to me why people don’t take the most obvious, direct path to solving their problems.

### AN UNUSUAL PRESCRIPTION

James admitted that his mother did have four sisters who even lived in the same city, but—no surprise—she was always fighting with them. At any given time, his mom may be speaking to one of her sisters, but that would not last long.

I decided to try one more time. “Well, James,” I said, “the next time your mother calls in the middle of the night, the best thing for you to do would be to call your father, or her sisters, and tell them that you’re frightened, worried, and don’t know what to do.”

“I can’t do that! It would kill her if I did that.”

Yeah, I thought to myself, but if you don’t do that, she’ll kill you.

When I next met with James, things were even worse, and he was feeling more desperate. Not surprisingly, he had refused to follow my directive to call his aunts or father. His mother, sensing some resolve on the part of her son to put distance between them, was escalating things even more, threatening suicide. I knew I had to do something fairly dramatic to break this escalating cycle, which was not good for either one of them.

“James,” I said to him in a soft voice, “I know that if you called your father or aunts after each of your mom’s midnight calls, she’d eventually stop frightening you. On the other hand, I understand how your loyalty and love keep you from doing that. So at this point, it looks like you’ve got one of two choices. You can either call your father or aunts after each midnight call, or go see her and do what you’ve been thinking about doing for years.”

“You mean sleep with my mother?”

Well, this wasn’t actually what I had in mind, but I kept my expression neutral. “Well, you’ve told me how close the two of you are. Ever since your mother divorced your father, you describe your relationship as ‘unnaturally intimate.’ You’ve mentioned how beautiful she is and how attractive you think she is, so maybe it’s time to get all this fantasy stuff out of the way, fly out there to see her, *and do it!*”

I expected James to jump out of his chair the way I would if a therapist recommended the same to me, but I was surprised when he turned pensive as he considered this possibility. He reminded me of Jack Benny when a robber shoved a gun into his back and said, “Your money or your life!” Long seconds later, Benny replied, “I’m thinking . . . I’m thinking.”

Two days after I proposed this Hobson’s choice to James, he finally called his father *and* his aunts after one of his mother’s midnight calls. Sure enough, her terrorizing calls suddenly stopped. Ever since then, she calls mostly on Sunday afternoons, always with a miraculously calm air about her.

### FROM MOTHER TO LOVER

James began therapy because he feared losing his girlfriend (through revulsion and abandonment) and his mother (through suicide), and ending up totally alone. Part of his problem was that he tried to separate from his mother by means of his compulsion. The cross-dressing and, more important, the secret about this behavior, was James’s little island of self, marked out as a child to protect himself from being totally absorbed by an overly possessive mother. He never developed an identity of his own, a sense of me-ness, of James-ness, which was uniquely his and different from his mother.

When James was little, he didn’t select his own toys, clothes, friends, or even his favorite snacks. His mother did everything for him in the name of love. James placed his mother’s need to be needed above his own needs for autonomy, choice, space, and privacy. He seldom spoke up for himself, which is why his voice didn’t develop. He had no father or siblings to complain to, or collude with, against his mother’s intrusive ways. James was too dependent on his mother to speak up, risk quarreling, and be thrown out like his father had been.

It was too dangerous for James to experience normal adolescent rebelliousness by saying no or doing the opposite of what his mother wanted. Instead he rebelled through his secret. As a child, James dutifully wore the clothing his mother laid out for him each night. But secretly, he rebelled by wearing women’s clothes without his mother’s knowledge. The cross-dressing also protected him from his own incestuous fears, since his mother would never be sexually interested in someone who wore women’s clothes.

Without a clear voice or identity of his own, James predictably got into trouble after his girlfriend moved in. His passivity, dependency, fear of abandonment, unclear emotional boundaries, and fear of intrusiveness and possessiveness that terrorized him growing up in his family reappeared with Jennie. He began losing himself to Jennie in the exact same ways he did with his mother. If you are wondering if

this is mere speculation on my part, I should also mention some rather compelling evidence for this hypothesis: the cross-dressing stopped when he moved out of his mother's home but resurfaced a month after Jennie moved in.

Once we were able to stop his mother from calling, the next step was to work on his relationship with Jennie. I asked him one day what it was about her that he found so difficult.

"Her anger scares me," James confessed, looking sheepish. "Jennie gets angry when I don't do what she wants. If I want tuna fish on white toast and she thinks whole wheat is healthier, I'll eat the whole wheat even though it makes me gag."

"What would happen if you insisted on the white bread?"

"She'll get pissed."

"So what's so terrible about that?"

"Lots of things. First of all, I don't like confrontations. Second, when Jennie gets mad she stays mad and makes me suffer so much that I end up doing what she wants. Besides, I'm afraid that if she stays unhappy too long she'll leave me."

"If you can't have your way with white bread," I pointed out to James, "then how are you going to deal with important differences like career, money, sex, and children?"

"Well, that's why I'm here. You see, I'm a very easygoing guy, so I don't mind Jennie feeling stronger about things than I do. Most of the time I give in without being resentful. But she does scare me when she doesn't get her way." He looked thoughtful for a moment, then added, "In many ways, she's like my mother."

Whereas a psychoanalyst may have applauded at this point, as a strategic therapist I was far more interested in helping him change the pattern rather than merely generate this insight. I confronted James with the idea that he was not really afraid of her anger as much as her dramatic tantrums. As long as he gave in to her, he was continuing to "reward" her for behavior that proved to be a highly effective way of getting her way.

James insisted that he was not so much giving in to her as respecting her feelings. The truth of the matter was that he feared if he did not give in to her, she would leave him. We went around and around about this until he admitted that he would like to get his way on occasion, and he'd also like to feel less resentful about always doing things Jennie's way.

"Then you have to speak up for yourself," I told him like a coach cheering on an athlete. "You have to stick to your guns and negotiate. You know, like binding arbitration where both sides are forced to negotiate until they both come up with something you can both live with."

As expected, their quarreling increased the next few weeks. James was now taking a more assertive position, which Jennie did not greatly appreciate. This frightened James terribly, always fearful that Jennie would leave if she didn't get her way.

## BRIDE AND GROOM

James asked if it might be appropriate to bring Jennie in for one session, because the quarreling was getting worse, and James was afraid Jennie would soon leave him. I readily agreed, excited at the prospect of being able to work with both of them together, even if for a single session.

When Jennie arrived, I wasn't surprised to find her warmer and more amiable than the way James described her. I invited her to share her version of the story, asking her what she thought their biggest problem was.

"He's too passive," Jennie said. "He defers too much and doesn't tell me what he wants. Sometimes I deliberately wait for him to initiate plans. And then I wait and wait until I can't wait anymore, and then I finally suggest something out of desperation."

"That's kind of surprising to hear that," I said, deciding to be blunt because of our limited time together. "James tells me you can be bossy and need to have your way all the time. He says that when you don't get what you want, you have terrible tantrums."

"I know," she said with a smile. "He tells me that too. But I'm really not that bossy. Usually, I wait until James decides to come up with an idea. When he doesn't, I get frustrated. When I can't wait any longer, I come up with something because I'm afraid if I wait for him, we'll wind up doing nothing. I react more out of exasperation than anything else. You have no idea how much money we waste on airplane fares because when he finally decides what he wants to do, the fares are twice as much as they would have been if we bought them two to three months earlier."

"What about your anger?" James challenged Jennie. I felt proud watching James speak up for himself.

Jennie turned to face James. “When I feel angry it is because of what you do when you’re mad at me. Instead of telling me you’re hurt or angry, you withdraw and stop talking to me. Sometimes you ignore me for days. Then I’m feeling so rejected and alone that I explode. My explosions are what you call tantrums.”

We ended our meeting by negotiating an arrangement whereby James agreed to speak up for himself more, and Jennie would tell him more explicitly what she was feeling. The plan was for them to stop withdrawing from one another when they felt hurt.

Sure enough, there was an immediate shift in their relationship as James began speaking up more and Jennie began to listen. James called me a few months after the therapy ended to let me know how things were going. He was excited and wanted me to know that he and Jennie had just gotten married. James’s mother predictably refused to attend the wedding. And there were two ceremonies: the public one with Jennie wearing the gown and James the tuxedo, and a private ceremony held in their apartment, where the bride wore the tux and the groom the gown.

### REFLECTING ON THE CASE

After Bergman told us this story, we were curious what it was about this patient that was so memorable to him. After all, cross-dressing is not all that unusual in New York City, even the variation that included tying oneself tightly to a chair.

“I think the fact that we were musicians,” Bergman says. “He was, of course, a very accomplished symphony musician, and I am a jazz pianist who never made it past weddings and bar mitzvahs. But I felt a musical connection with this guy in some way.”

Bergman also points out that he loved the New York one-liners and the back-and-forth nature of their conversations. He likens the feeling to two jazz players who are trading riffs back and forth, reading where each one is going next.

“Plus,” Bergman mentions, “I empathized with this guy’s passivity. I too was a very passive guy who had a very controlling, aggressive mom, and for many years I didn’t speak up for myself. So there was a piece of me I saw in this guy that made it fun being able to coach him to speak up more for himself. I was convinced that the lack of his voice was the main issue more than anything else.”

Bergman also felt challenged by this patient because he had not, to this point, ever worked with cross-dressing in any way. “I preferred to look at his behavior in a systemic way and not to see it as an identity disorder, which I think would be very resistant to change.”

What Bergman means is that rather than looking at his patient as a sexual pervert, as someone with a sexual identity disorder, he instead conceived of the problem as a function of relationships in his life with his girlfriend and his mother. A big clue that this approach might be helpful occurred when Bergman realized that the cross-dressing had begun again only after the girlfriend moved in.

The other thing that sticks with him about the case is that he can’t believe that he actually prescribed incest to his patient, even though it was the most effective strategy he could conceive at the time. Bergman could not get the guy to follow his therapeutic advice, which was to call his father or aunts for help. He had to find some way to provoke the man into taking action.

“I take pride in being a responsible, thoughtful therapist,” Bergman said, “but somehow the case drove me to come up with these interventions.” Drawing from his book *Fishing for Barracuda*, Bergman explained that because the patient was unwilling to do what would have calmed his family system down, what needed to happen was an intervention at the same level of drama as what he presented. Given the rather unusual set of symptoms, it took an equally powerful prescription to get through to him. Luckily it worked, and the patient was able to make the appropriate choice of behavioral change.

Because James moved away from New York City, Bergman hasn’t seen him for many years, but they talk to each other from time to time, and James and Jennie are still married and have a family.