



Robert Lindner

**THE GIRL
WHO COULDN'T
STOP EATING**

Psychotherapy: Portraits in Fiction

The Girl Who Couldn't Stop Eating

Robert Lindner

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www.freepsychotherapybooks.org
ebooks@theipi.org

Introduction

“The Girl Who Couldn’t Stop Eating” by Robert Lindner

From its inception the “talking cure” has existed on the boundary between science and art. Some gifted psychotherapists, like Robert Lindner, have written “case histories” that are both scientific works of art and artistic works of science. In “The Girl Who Couldn’t Stop Eating,” Lindner challenges the misconception that analysts are, at all times, scientific—objective and emotionally detached from their patients—and demonstrates how psychotherapy can be an experience of engagement, commitment, and caring concern. On occasion, therapists have raw and primitive feelings toward their patients. Some patients, like Laura, would tax any therapist’s emotional maturity and competence and provoke agonizing self-examination. It is these patients who also strengthen Lindner’s view that therapy “is a vital art that demands more of its practitioners than the clever exercise of their brains. Into its practice also goes the heart, and there are occasions when genuine human feelings take precedence over the rituals and dogmas of the craft.”

The Girl Who Couldn't Stop Eating

Robert Lindner

"Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires."

—Wm. Blake, *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

Laura had two faces. The one I saw that morning was hideous. Swollen like a balloon at the point of bursting, it was a caricature of a face, the eyes lost in pockets of sallow flesh and shining feverishly with a sick glow, the nose buried between bulging cheeks splattered with blemishes, the chin an oily shadow mocking human contour; and somewhere in this mass of fat a crazy-angled carmined hole was her mouth.

Her appearance astonished and disgusted me. The revulsion I felt could not be hidden. Observing it, she screamed her agonized self-loathing.

"Look at me, you son-of-a-bitch!" she cried. "Look at me and vomit! Yes—it's me—Laura. Don't you recognize me? Now you see, don't you? Now you see what I've been talking about all these weeks—while you've been sitting back there doing nothing, saying nothing. Not even listening when I've begged and begged you for help. Look at me!"

"Lie down, please," I said, "and tell me about it."

A cracked laugh, short and rasping, came from her hidden mouth. The piglike eyes raised to some unseen auditor above, while clenched fists went up in a gesture of wrath.

“Tell him about it! Tell him about it! What the hell do you think I’ve been telling you about all this time!”

“Laura,” I said more firmly, “stop yelling and lie down”—and I turned away from her toward the chair behind the couch. But before I could move she grabbed my arms and swung me around to face her. I felt her nails bite through my coat and dig into the skin beneath. Her grip was like a vise.

She thrust her face toward mine. Close up, it was a huge, rotting wart. Her breath was foul as she expelled it in a hoarse, passionate whisper.

“No,” she said, “I’m not going to lie down. I’m going to stand here in front of you and make you look at me—make you look at me as I have to look at myself. You want me to lie down so you won’t have to see me. Well, I won’t do it. I’m going to stand here forever!” She shook me. “Well,” she said. “Say something! Go on, tell me what you’re thinking. I’m loathsome, aren’t I? Disgusting. Say it! Say it!” Then suddenly her grasp loosened. Collapsing, she fell to the floor. “O, God,” she whimpered, “please help me. Please . . . please . . .”

I had never met anyone like Laura before, nor had I encountered the strange symptoms she presented. In the literature of morbidity occasional

reference was made to a disorder called bulimia, or pathological craving for food; and I had of course met with numerous instances of related oral disturbances, such as perverted appetite or addiction to a specific food. As a matter of fact, one of the most amusing incidents of my career concerned a case in this category. It happened at the Federal Penitentiary in Atlanta, where I had been sent on a special assignment during the first years of the war. One day I received a note from an inmate requesting an answer to the engaging question, "Do you think I will get ptomaine poisoning from eating tomatoes on top of razor blades?" I showed this provocative communication to my colleagues in the Clinic who thought, as I did, that someone was pulling my leg. In reply, therefore, I wrote the questioner that the outcome of such a meal depended on whether the razor blades were used or new. Much to my chagrin, a few days later the X-ray technician called me into his office and exhibited two pictures on the stereoscopic viewer, inviting me to look at the "damnedest thing you ever saw." I looked. In the area of the stomach I saw a number of clearly defined, oblong shadows. "What the heck are those?" I asked. "What do they look like to you?" he responded. I looked again. "To me," I said, "they look like—well, I'll be damned! Razor blades!"

We called the inmate from the hall where he had been sitting hunched over on a bench, moaning with pain. When he saw me, he complained, "I did what you said. I only ate new blades like you told me. . . . Now look what's happened!"

“Musta been the tomatoes, then,” was the technician’s dry comment.

When the surgeons went to work on this man they discovered him to be a veritable walking hardware store. I was present in the operating room when they opened him up, and my eyes bulged with amazement as they carefully removed piece after piece of the junk he later told us he had been swallowing for many years. Somewhere in my private collection of psychological curiosia, I have a photograph of the debris collected from this man’s interior. It shows not only numerous fragments of razor blades, but also two spoons, a coil of wire, some bottle caps, a small screw driver, a few bolts, about five screws, some nails, many bits of colored glass and a couple of twisted metallic objects no one can identify.

Laura’s difficulty, however, did not involve the perversion of appetite but something far more distressing psychologically. She was subject to episodes of depression during which she would be seized by an overwhelming compulsion to gorge herself, to eat almost continuously. A victim of forces beyond her ken or control, when this strange urge came upon her she was ravenous—insatiable. Until she reached a stage of utter exhaustion, until her muscles no longer responded, until her distended insides protested with violent pain, until her strained senses succumbed to total intoxication, she would cram herself with every available kind of food and drink.

The torment Laura suffered before, during and after these fits (as she called them) is really beyond description, if not beyond belief. Articulate as she was, I could not appreciate the absolute horror, the degradation, the insensate passion of these wild episodes until, with my own eyes, I saw her in the midst of one. Her own report of the onset and course of these experiences, a report I heard many times, is as follows:

“It seems to come out of nowhere. I’ve tried to discover what touches it off, what leads up to it, but I can’t. Suddenly, it hits me. . . . It seems I can be doing anything at the time—painting, working at the Gallery, cleaning the apartment, reading, or talking to someone. It doesn’t matter where I am or what’s going on. One minute I’m fine, feeling gay, busy, loving life and people. The next minute I’m on an express highway to hell.

“I think it begins with a feeling of emptiness inside. Something. I don’t know what to call it, starts to ache; something right in the center of me feels as if it’s opening up, spreading apart maybe. It’s like a hole in my vitals appears. Then the emptiness starts to throb - at first softly like a fluttering pulse. For a little while, that’s all that happens. But then the pulsing turns into a regular beat, and the beat gets stronger and stronger. The hole gets bigger. Soon I feel as if there’s nothing to me but a vast, yawning space surrounded by skin that grabs convulsively at nothingness. The beating gets louder. The sensation changes from an ache to a hurt, a pounding hurt. The feeling of emptiness becomes agony. In a short while there’s nothing of me, of Laura,

but an immense, drumming vacuum.”

I remember asking her, when she reached this point in her description, where the hunger started, at what place in the course of this weird, crescendoing compound of emptiness and pain the compulsion to eat entered.

“It’s there from the first,” she would say. “The moment I become aware of the hole opening inside I’m terrified. I want to fill it. I have to. So I start to eat. I eat and eat—everything, anything I can find to put in my mouth. It doesn’t matter what it is, so long as it’s food and can be swallowed. It’s as if I’m in a race with the emptiness. As it grows, so does my hunger. But it’s not really hunger, you see. It’s a frenzy, a fit, something automatic and uncontrollable. I want to stop it, but I can’t. If I try to, the hole gets bigger, I become idiotic with terror, I feel as if I’m going to *become* nothing, become the emptiness—get swallowed up by it. So I’ve got to eat.”

I tried to find out, in the early days of her analysis, if there was any pattern to her eating, any design, any specificity.

“No,” Laura told me. “It’s just a crazy, formless thing. There’s nothing I *want* to eat, nothing in the world that will satisfy me- because, you see, it’s the emptiness that has to be filled. So it doesn’t matter what I swallow. The main thing, the only thing, is to get it inside of me. So I stuff anything I can find into my mouth, loathing myself while I do it, and swallowing without tasting. I eat. I eat until my jaws get numb with chewing. I eat until my body swells. I swill

like an animal—a pig. I get sick with eating and still I eat—fighting the sickness with swallowing, retching, vomiting—but always eating more and more. And if my supply of food runs out, I send for more. Before it comes I go mad with the growing emptiness, I shiver with fear. And when it arrives I fall on it like someone who’s been starved for weeks.”

I would ask her how the frenzy ended.

“Most of the time I eat myself into unconsciousness. I think I reach a state of drunkenness, or something very like it. Anyhow, I pass out. This is what usually happens. Once or twice I’ve been stopped by exhaustion. I couldn’t open my mouth any more, couldn’t lift my arms. And there’ve been times, too, when my body just revolted, refused to take in any more food.

“But the very worst is the aftermath. No matter how the fit ends, it’s followed by a long sleep, sometimes for as much as two whole days and nights. A sleep of sick dreams that go on and on, terrible dreams I can hardly recall on awakening—thank goodness. And when I awaken I have to face myself, the mess I’ve made of Laura. That’s even more horrible than what’s gone before. I look at myself and can hardly believe the loathsome thing I see in the mirror is human, let alone me. I’m all swollen, everywhere. My body is out of shape. My face is a nightmare. I have no features. I’ve become a creature from hell with rottenness oozing from every pore. And I want to destroy this disgusting thing I’ve become.”

Three months of intensive analytic work had passed before the morning Laura confronted me with her tragically distorted body and insisted I look at it. They had been stormy months for both of us, each analytic hour tearful and dramatic as Laura recited the story of her life. In the recounting she could find no relief, as many other patients do, since it was a tale of almost endless sorrow in which one dismal incident was piled upon another. Used as I am to hearing the woeful stories of abuse, neglect and unhappiness that people bring to an analyst, I was nevertheless moved by Laura's narrative and could hardly help expressing my sympathy. By this I do not mean that I verbalized the feelings she aroused in me, for the discipline of these long years of practice and the experience gained through the many errors I have made safeguard against such a gross tactical blunder; but in small ways of which I was largely unaware I communicated my compassion to her. With Laura, this turned out to be a serious mistake. Typically misreading my attitude for one of pity, hardly had the analysis begun than she set out to exploit this quality and to demand more and more of it. Paradoxically, just because I somehow betrayed sympathy for her, she charged me increasingly with a total lack of warmth, and upbraided me almost daily for my "coldness," my "stonelike impassivity," my "heartless indifference" to her suffering. Our meetings, therefore, followed a curious pattern after the first few weeks. They would begin with one of her moving chronicles, to the telling of which she brought a remarkable histrionic talent; then she would wait for some response from

me: when this was not forthcoming in the manner she desired, she would attack me viciously.

I recall one such hour quite clearly, not only because of its content but also, perhaps, because it preceded by a few days the episode I described earlier; and the contrast between the way Laura looked on the day I have in mind and her appearance only a short while thereafter remains vivid in my memory. For Laura between seizures was nothing like the piteous wreck she made of herself at those times. Although poor, she always dressed becomingly, with a quiet good taste that never failed to emphasize her best features. The ascetic regime she imposed on herself between bouts of abnormal eating kept her fashionably thin. Her face, set off in a frame of hair so black that it reflected deep, purple lights, was not pretty in the ordinary sense, but striking, compelling attention because of its exotic cast. It conveyed an almost Oriental flavor by the juxtaposition of exceptionally high cheekbones, heavy-lidded brown eyes, a moderately small, thin nose with widely flaring nostrils, and an ovoid mouth. On the day I wish to tell about, one could hardly imagine the ruin that was even then creeping up on her.

She began the hour with her usual complaint of fantastic nightmares populated by grotesque forms whose exact description and activities always eluded her. These dreams occurred every night, she said, and interfered with her rest. She would awaken in terror from one, often aroused by her own frightened screams, only to have another of the same kind as soon as she fell

asleep again. They were weird dreams, she claimed, and left her with only vague memories in the morning of surrealistic scenes, faceless figures, and nameless obscenities just beyond the perimeters of recall. Water—endless, slow-moving stretches of it, or torrential cascades that beat upon her with the fury of whips; footsteps—the haunting, inexorable beat of a disembodied pair of shoes mercilessly following her through empty corridors, or the mad staccato of an angry mob of pursuers; and laughter—the echoing hysteria of a lone madwoman’s howl of mockery, or the shrieking, derisive chorus of countless lunatics: these three elements were never absent from her nighttime gallery of horrors.

“But you can’t remember anything more?” I asked.

“Nothing definite—only water again, and being chased, and the sound of laughter.”

“Yet you speak of odd shapes, rooms, landscapes, action of some sort, scenes. . . . Describe them.”

“I can’t,” she said, covering her eyes with her hands. “Please don’t keep after me so. I’m telling you everything I remember. Maybe they’re so terrible I have to forget them—my dreams, I mean.”

“What else could you mean?” I entered quickly.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. My memories, I guess.”

“Any particular memory?”

“They’re all terrible. . . .”

I waited for her to continue, observing meanwhile that her hands were no longer over her eyes but interlocked tightly over her forehead, the knuckles slowly whitening and the fingers flushing as she increased their pressure against each other.

“I’m thinking,” she began, “about the night my father left. Have I ever told you about it?”

. . . It was raining outside. The supper dishes had just been cleared away; Laura and her brother were sitting at the dining-room table doing their homework. In the kitchen Freda, the oldest child, was washing up. Their mother had moved her wheel chair into the front bedroom, where she was listening to the radio. The apartment, a railroad flat on the edge of the factory district, was cold and damp. A chill wind from the river penetrated the windows, whistling through newspapers that had been stuffed into cracks around the frames. Laura’s hands were stiff with cold. From time to time she would put her pencil down and blow on her fingers or cross her arms, inserting her hands beneath the two sweaters she wore and pressing them into her armpits. Sometimes, just for fun and out of boredom with her sixth-grade geography lesson, she would expel her breath toward the lamp in the middle of the table, pretending the cloud it made was smoke from an invisible

cigarette. Across from her Little Mike, intent on forming fat letters according to the copybook models before him, seemed unaware of the cold as he labored. Laura could tell which letter of the alphabet he was practicing from watching his mouth as lips and tongue traced familiar patterns.

When the door opened, Little Mike glanced up at her. Their eyes met in a secret communication of recognition and fear as heavy footsteps came down the hall. Bending again to their lessons, they now only pretended to work. In the kitchen Freda closed the tap so that she, too, could listen.

In a moment, they heard their father's grunting hello and a mumbled reply in kind from their mother. Then there was a creak of the springs as he sat heavily on the bed, followed by the sharp noise of his big shoes falling to the floor when he kicked them off. The bedsprings groaned again as he stood up.

"Peasant," they heard their mother say over the music from the radio, "if you're not going to bed, wear your shoes. It's cold in here."

"Let me alone," he replied. "I'm not cold."

" 'I'm not cold,' " their mother mimicked. "Of course you're not cold. Why should you be? If I had a bellyful of whisky I wouldn't be cold either."

"Don't start that again, Anna," he said. "I'm tired."

"Tired," she mocked. "And from what are you tired?—Not from working,

that's for sure."

"Oh, shut up, Anna," he said wearily over his shoulder as he walked through the doorway. Behind him there was the click of the dial as their mother shut off the radio, then the rasping sound of her wheel chair following him into the dining room.

Laura looked up at her father and smiled. He bent to brush his lips against the cheek she offered. The stiff hairs of his thick mustache scraped her skin and the smell of whisky made her slightly dizzy. Straightening, he ruffled Little Mike's hair with one huge hand, while with the other he pulled a chair away from the table.

"Freda!" he called as he sat down.

The older girl came to the door, smoothing her hair with both hands. "Yes, Papa," she answered.

"Get the old man something to eat, huh?" he asked.

Anna wheeled herself into the space between the table and the open kitchen door where Freda stood. "There's nothing here for you," she said. "You want to eat, come home when supper's ready. This ain't a restaurant."

Ignoring her, he spoke over her head to Freda. "Do like I said, get me some supper."

As Freda turned to obey, Anna shouted at her. "Wait! Don't listen to

him!" She glared balefully at her husband, her thin face twisted with hate. When she spoke, the veins in her long neck stood out and her whole shrunken body trembled. "Bum! You come home to eat when you've spent all the money on those tramps. You think I don't know. Where've you been since yesterday? Don't you know you've got a family?"

"Anna," he said, "I told you to shut up."

"I'm not shutting up.. . . You don't care what happens to us. You don't care if we're cold or starving or what. All you think about is the lousy whores you give your money to. Your wife and children can rot for all it matters to you."

"Anna," he started to say, "the kids . . ."

"The kids," she screamed. "You think they don't know what kind of rotten father they've got? You think they don't know where you go when you don't come home?"

He slammed his palm down on the table and stood up.

"Enough!" he yelled. "I don't have to listen to that. Now keep quiet!"

He started for the kitchen. Anticipating him, Anna whirled her chair across the entrance. "Where're you going?" she asked.

"If you won't get me something to eat I'll get it myself."

“No you won’t,” she said. “There nothing in there for you.”

“Get out of my way, Anna,” he said menacingly, “I want to go in the kitchen.”

“When you bring home money for food you can go in the kitchen,” she said.

His face darkened and his hands clenched into fists.

“Cripple!” he spat. “Move away or I’ll—”

Her laugh was short and bitter. “You’ll what? Hit me? Go ahead—hit the cripple! What’re you waiting for?”

Framed in the doorway they faced each other, frozen in a tableau of mutual hatred. Behind the father Laura and Little Mike sat stiffly, eyes wide and bodies rigid. In the silence that followed Anna’s challenge they heard the rain slap against the windows.

Their father’s hands relaxed slowly. “If you don’t move out of the way,” he said evenly, “I’m getting out of this house and I’m never coming back.”

“So go,” Anna said, leering up at him. “Who wants you here anyway?”

Like a statue, he stood still for a long minute; then he turned and walked swiftly toward the bedroom, followed by their eyes. Now the tense quiet was broken by the noises he made as he moved around the next room, and

shadows, cast by his tall figure, crossed and recrossed the threshold.

On Anna's face, when she became aware of what he was doing, the look of triumph gave place to alarm. Her bony fingers clutched the wheels of her chair. Hastily, she propelled herself around the table. In the doorway, she stopped.

"Mike," she said, "what're you doing?"

There was no answer—only the sound of the bedsprings, twice, and the firm stamp of his shoes against the naked floorboards.

"Mike"—her voice was louder this time and tremulous with fright—"where're you going?—Wait!"

The wheel chair raced into the bedroom, beyond sight of the children. They listened, their chests aching with terror.

She clutched at his coat. "Mike. Wait, Mike," she cried. "Please don't go. I didn't mean it. Please. . . . Come back. Come into the kitchen. I was only fooling, Mike. Don't go."

He pulled away from her, lifting her body from the chair. Her hands broke the fall as useless legs collapsed. The outer door slammed. Then there was the slapping sound of rain again between her heavy sobs. . . .

"—He meant it," Laura said. "I guess she went too far that time. He never did come back. Once in a while he'd send a few dollars in a plain envelope. On

my next birthday I got a box of salt-water taffy from Atlantic City. . . . But we never saw him again.”

She fumbled with the catch on her purse and groped inside for a handkerchief. Tears were streaming from the corners of her eyes. Some caught on the lobes of her ears and hung there like brilliant pendants. Idly, I wondered if they tickled.

She dabbed at her eyes, then blew her nose noisily. Her bosom rose and fell unevenly. The room was quiet. I glanced at my watch.

“Well?” she said.

“Well what?” I asked.

“Why don’t you say something?”

“What should I say?”

“You might at least express some sympathy.”

“For whom?”

“For me, of course!”

“Why only you?” I asked. “What about Freda, or Little Mike, or your mother? Or even your father?”

“But I’m the one who’s been hurt most by it,” she said petulantly. “You know that. You should feel sorry for me.”

“Is that why you told me this story . . . so that I’d feel sorry for you?”

She turned on the couch and looked at me, her face drawn in a grimace of absolute malice.

“You don’t give an inch, do you?” she said.

“You don’t want an inch, Laura,” I responded quietly. “You want it all. . . from me, from everybody.”

“What d’you mean?” she asked.

“Well, for example, the story you just told. Of course it’s a dreadful one, and anyone hearing it would be moved, but—”

“—But you’re not,” she almost spat. “Not you. Because you’re not human. You’re a stone—a cold stone. You give nothing. You just sit there like a goddam’ block of wood while I tear my guts out!” Her voice, loaded with odium, rose to a trembling scream. “Look at you!” she cried. “I wish you could see yourself like I see you. You and your lousy objectivity! Objectivity, my eye! Are you a man or a machine? Don’t you ever *feel* anything? Do you have blood or ice water in your veins? Answer me! Goddam’ you, answer me!”

I remained silent.

“You see?” she shouted. “You say nothing. Must I die to get a word out of you? What d’you want from me?”

She stood up. “All right,” she said. “Don’t say anything. . . . Don’t give anything. I’m going. I can see you don’t want me here. I’m going—and I’m not coming back.” With a swirl of her skirt she rushed from the room.

Curious, I reflected, how well she enacted the story she had just told. I wondered if she knew it too?

Laura came back, of course—four times each week for the next two years. During the first year she made only few—and those very minor—advances so far as her symptoms were concerned, particularly the symptoms of depression and sporadic overeating. These persisted: indeed, for several months following the “honeymoon” period of psychoanalysis—when, as usual, there was a total remission of all symptoms and Laura, like so many patients during this pleasant time, believed herself “cured”—her distress increased. The seizures of abnormal appetite became more frequent, and the acute depressions not only occurred closer to each other in time but were of greater intensity. So, on the surface, it seemed that treatment was not helping my patient very much, even that it might be making her worse. But I knew—and so did Laura—that subtle processes had been initiated by her therapy, and that these were slowly, but secretly, advancing against her neurosis.

This is a commonplace of treatment, known only to those who have undergone the experience of psychoanalysis and those who practice the art. Externally, all appears to be the same as it was before therapy, often rather

worse; but in the mental underground, unseen by any observer and inaccessible to the most probing investigation, the substructure of the personality is being affected. Insensibly but deliberately the foundations of neurosis are being weakened while, at the same time, there are being erected new and more durable supports on which, eventually, the altered personality can rest. Were this understood by the critics of psychoanalysis (or better still, by friends and relatives of analysands who understandably complain of the lack of evident progress), many current confusions about the process would disappear, and a more rational discussion of its merits as a form of therapy would be made possible.

For a year, then, Laura seemed to be standing still or losing ground. Chiefly, as in the episode I have already related, she reviewed her past and, in her sessions with me, either immediately or soon after, acted out their crucial or formative aspects. My consulting room became a stage on which she dramatized her life: my person became the target against which she directed the sad effects of her experience. In this manner she sought compensation for past frustrations, utilizing the permissive climate of therapy to obtain benefits she had missed, satisfactions that had been denied, and comforts she had lacked. Since the total effect of this pattern of emotional damming had been to cut her off from the many real satisfactions life offered, and to force her energies and talents into unproductive and even self-destructive channels, I allowed her, for that first year, almost endless opportunity for the “drainage”

she required. The idea behind my attitude of complete permissiveness in therapy was to hold up to her a mirror of her behavior and to let her see not only the extravagance of the methods she used to obtain neurotic gratification, but also the essential hollowness, the futility and the infantilism of the desires she had been pursuing by such outlandish methods all of her life. Finally, the procedure was designed to illustrate, in sharpest perspective, the impossibility of securing basic, long-lasting and solid satisfactions from her accustomed modes of behavior. The latter aim, of course, set definite limits on my responsiveness to her conduct: I had to be careful to measure out to her, at the proper time and in correct amounts, the rewards she deserved when these were due her as a consequence of mature behavior toward mature goals.

Yes, this first year with Laura was a trying one, not only for her but for her analyst. I often wished she had chosen someone else to take her troubles to, and could hardly help hoping, on those many occasions when she threatened to break off treatment, that I would never see her again.

One episode from this time haunts me. I set it down here to show the strain she placed me under as much as to illustrate my technique with her and the weird dynamics of her neurosis that were uncovered by this technique.

According to my notes, what I am about to tell took place in the eleventh

month of psychoanalysis. By that time the pattern of treatment had stabilized, I was in possession of most of the accessible facts of Laura's life, and the more obvious psychodynamics of her personality disorder were known to us. She, meanwhile, was in a period of relative quiet and contentment. It had been a month or more since her last attack, her job at the Gallery was going well, and she had recently formed a promising relationship with an eligible young man. It was on the theme of this affair that the first of these two crucial hours began, for Laura was deeply concerned about it and wished ardently that it might develop into something more rewarding and more lasting than her many previous romances.

"I don't want to foul this one up," she said, "but I'm afraid I'm going to. I need your help desperately."

"In what way d'you think you might foul it up?" I asked.

"Oh," she replied airily, "by being my usual bitchy self. You know—you ought to since you pointed it out; you know how possessive I get, how demanding I become. But I'd like, just for a change, not to be that way. For once, I'd like to have a love affair work out well for me."

"You mean you're thinking of matrimony?" I asked.

She laughed brightly. "Well," she said, "if you must know, I've had a few choice daydreams—fantasies, you'd probably call them—about marrying Ben. But that's not what I've got my heart set on now. What I want is love—I

want to give it and I want to get it.”

“If that attitude is genuine,” I said, “you don’t need my help in your affair.”

She ground out the cigarette she was smoking against the bottom of the ash tray with short, angry jabs.

“You’re horrible,” she complained, “just horrible. Here I tell you something that I think shows real progress, and right away you throw cold water on it.”

“What d’you think shows progress?”

“Why my recognition of giving, of course. I hope you noticed that I put it first.”

“I did.”

“And doesn’t that mean something to you? Doesn’t that show how far I’ve come?”

“It does,” I said, “if it’s genuine.”

“Goddammit!” she flared. “You call *me* insatiable; *you’re* the one who’s never satisfied. But I’ll show you yet.”

She lit another cigarette and for the next few moments smoked in silence. Quite naturally my skepticism had shaken her confidence somewhat,

as I had meant it to do, since I knew from experience how much she was given to these pat, semianalytical formulations that were consciously designed to impress as well as mislead me. I was just considering the wisdom of pursuing the topic she had opened and getting her somehow to explore her real goals in this new relationship when she began talking again.

“Anyhow,” she said, “that’s not what I wanted to talk about today. I had a dream. . . . Shall I tell you about it?”

I have found that when a patient uses this way of presenting a dream—announcing it first, then withholding until the analyst asks for it; actually dangling it like some tantalizing fruit before the analyst’s eyes but insisting he reach out for it—the analyst had better listen closely. For this particular mode of dream presentation signifies the special importance of the dream, and it can be anticipated that it holds some extraordinarily meaningful clue to the patient’s neurosis. Unconsciously, the patient, too, “knows” this, and by the use of the peculiar formula communicates his inarticulate but nonetheless high estimate of the dream’s value. More than this, he is offering the dream, when he invites attention to it this way, as a gift to the analyst, a gift that has implications extending far beyond the dream itself and including the possibility of surrendering an entire area of neurotic functioning. His reservations about giving up a piece of his neurosis and the gratifications he has been receiving from it are betrayed by his use of the “shall I tell you about it?”: he wants assurance, in advance, that the sacrifice will be worth while,

that the analyst will appreciate (and love him for) it, and that he (the patient) will experience an equal amount of gratification from the newer, healthier processes which will henceforth replace the old. For this reason the analyst must be wary of reaching for the tempting fruit being offered him; to grasp at it would be to rob his patient of the painful but necessary first steps toward responsible self-hood, and to commit himself to bargains and promises he has no right to make.

Therefore, when Laura held out the gift of her dream, although I was most eager to hear it, I responded with the evasive but always handy reminder of the “basic rule”: “Your instructions have always been to say what comes to you during your hours here. If you’re thinking of a dream, tell it.”

“Well,” she said, “this is what I dreamed. . . . I was in what appeared to be a ballroom or dance hall, but I knew it was really a hospital. A man came up to me and told me to undress, take all my clothes off. He was going to give me a gynecological examination. I did as I was told but I was very frightened. While I was undressing, I noticed that he was doing something to a woman at the other end of the room. She was sitting or lying in a funny kind of contraption with all kinds of levers and gears and pulleys attached to it. I knew that I was supposed to be next, that I would have to sit in that thing while he examined me. Suddenly he called my name and I found myself running to him. The chair or table—whatever it was—was now empty, and he told me to get on it. I refused and began to cry. It started to rain—great big drops of rain. He

pushed me to the floor and spread my legs for the examination. I turned over on my stomach and began to scream. I woke myself up screaming.”

Following the recital Laura lay quietly on the couch, her eyes closed, her arms crossed over her bosom.

“Well,” she said after a brief, expectant silence, “what does it mean?”

“Laura,” I admonished, “you know better than that. Associate, and we’ll find out.”

“The first thing I think of is Ben,” she began. “He’s an intern at University, you know. I guess that’s the doctor in the dream—or maybe it was you. Anyhow, whoever it was, I wouldn’t let him examine me.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve always been afraid of doctors . . . afraid they might hurt me.”

“How will they hurt you?”

“I don’t know. By jabbing me with a needle, I guess. That’s funny. I never thought of it before. When I go to the dentist I don’t mind getting a needle; but with a doctor it’s different. . . .” Here I noticed how the fingers of both hands clutched her arms at the elbows while her thumbs nervously smoothed the inner surfaces of the joints. “I shudder when I think of having my veins punctured. I’m always afraid that’s what a doctor will do to me.”

“Has it ever been done?”

She nodded. “Once, in college, for a blood test. I passed out cold.”

“What about gynecological examinations?”

“I’ve never had one. I can’t even bear to think of someone poking around inside me.” Again silence; then, “Oh,” she said, “I see it now. It’s sex I’m afraid of. The doctor in the dream *is* Ben. He wants me to have intercourse, but it scares me and I turn away from him. That’s true. . . . The other night after the concert he came to my apartment. I made coffee for us and we sat there talking. It was wonderful—so peaceful, just the two of us. Then he started to make love to me. I loved it—until it came to having intercourse. I stopped him there: I had to; I became terrified. He probably thinks I’m a virgin—or that I don’t care for him enough. But it isn’t that. I do—and I want him to love me. Oh, Dr. Lindner, that’s why I need your help so much now. . . .”

“But other men have made love to you,” I reminded her.

“Yes,” she said, sobbing now, “but I only let them as a last resort, as a way of holding on to them a little longer. And if you’ll remember, I’ve only had the real thing a few times. Mostly I’ve made love to the man—satisfied him somehow. I’d do anything to keep them from getting inside me—poking into me . . . like the needle, I guess.”

“But why, Laura?”

"I don't know," she cried, "I don't know. Tell me."

"I think the dream tells you," I said.

"The dream I just told you?"

"Yes. . . There's a part of it you haven't considered. What comes to your mind when you think of the other woman in the dream, the woman the doctor was examining before you?"

"The contraption she was sitting in," Laura exclaimed. "It was like a—like a wheel chair—my mother's wheel chair! Is that right?"

"Very likely," I said.

"But why would he be examining *her*? What would that mean?"

"Well, think of what that kind of examination signifies for you."

"Sex," she said. "Intercourse—that's what it means. So that's what it is—that's what it means! Intercourse put my mother in the wheel chair. It paralyzed her. And I'm afraid that's what it will do to me. So I avoid it—because I'm scared it will do the same thing to me. . . . Where did I ever get such a crazy idea?"

—Like so many such "ideas" all of us have, this one was born in Laura long before the age when she could think for herself. It arose out of sensations of terror when she would awaken during the night, shocked from sleep by the

mysterious noises her parents made in their passion, and incapable yet of assembling these sounds into a design purporting the tender uses of love. The heavy climate of hate, the living antagonism between her parents, made this impossible; so the sounds in the night—the “Mike, you’re hurting me,” the moans and cries, the protestations, even the laughter—impressed upon her the darker side of their sex, the brutish animality of it and the pain. And when the disease struck her mother a natural bridge of associations was formed between the secret drama that played itself out while Laura slept—or sometimes awakened her to fright—and the final horror of the body imprisoned on the chair.

I explained this to Laura, documenting my explanation with material the analysis had already brought out. For her, the interpretation worked a wonder of insight. Obvious as it may seem to us, to Laura, from whom it had been withheld by many resistances and defenses, it came as a complete surprise. Almost immediately, even before she quit the couch at the end of that hour, she felt a vast relief from the pressure of many feelings that had tormented her until that very day. The idea that sexual love was impossible for her, the idea that she was so constructed physically that the joys of love would forever be denied her, feelings of self-dissatisfaction, and numerous other thoughts and emotions collected around the central theme of sex—these vanished as if suddenly atomized.

“I feel free,” Laura said as she rose from the couch when time was called.

“I think this has been the most important hour of my analysis.” At the door she paused and turned to me with moist, shining eyes. “I knew I could count on you,” she said. “And I’m very grateful—believe me.”

When she left, in the ten-minute interval between patients during which I ordinarily make notes, attend to messages or read, I reviewed the hour just ended. I, too, had a feeling of satisfaction and relief from it. And while I did not consider it to have been her most important hour—for the analyst’s standards are markedly different from the patient’s—nevertheless I did not underestimate its potential for the eventual solution of Laura’s difficulties. I therefore looked forward to her next hour with pleasurable anticipation, thinking that the mood in which she had departed would continue and hoping she would employ it to stabilize her gains.

The session I have just described took place on a Saturday. On Monday, Laura appeared at the appointed time. The moment I saw her in the anteroom I knew something had gone wrong. She sat dejectedly, chin cupped in her hands, a light coat carelessly draped about her shoulders. When I greeted her, she raised her eyes listlessly.

“Ready for me?” she asked in a toneless voice.

I nodded and motioned her into the next room. She stood up wearily, dropping the coat on the chair, and preceded me slowly. As I closed the door behind us, she flopped on the couch sideways, her feet remaining on the floor.

In the same moment she raised one arm to her head and covered her brow with the back of her hand. The other arm dangled over the side of the couch.

“I don’t know why we bother,” she said in the same flat voice.

I lit a cigarette and settled back in my chair to listen.

She sighed. “Aren’t you going to ask me what’s wrong?”

“There’s no need to ask,” I said. “You’ll tell me in due time.”

“I guess I will,” she said, sighing again.

She lifted her feet from the floor, then squirmed to find a more comfortable position. Her skirt wrinkled under her and for some moments she was busy with the tugging and pulling women usually go through in their first minutes of each session. Under her breath she muttered impatient curses. At last she was settled.

“I don’t have to tell you I went to bed with Ben, do I?” she asked.

“If that’s what you’re thinking of,” I said.

“I think you must be a voyeur,” she commented acidly after another pause. “That’s probably the way you get your kicks.”

I said nothing.

“Probably why you’re an analyst, too,” she continued. “Sublimating . . . isn’t that the word? Playing Peeping Tom with your ears.”

“Laura,” I asked, “why are you being so aggressive?”

“Because I hate you,” she said, “I hate your guts.”

“Go on.”

She shrugged. “That’s all. I’ve got nothing more to say. I only came here today to tell you how much I despise you. I’ve said it and I’m finished. . . . Can I go now?” She sat up and reached for her purse.

“If that’s what you want to do,” I said.

“You don’t care?” she asked.

“Care isn’t the right word,” I said. “Of course I’ll be sorry to see you leave. But, as I said, if that’s what you want to do . . .”

“More double talk,” she sighed. “All right. The hell with it. I’m here and I may as well finish out the hour—after all, I’m paying for it.” She fell back on the couch and lapsed into silence again.

“Laura,” I said, “you seem very anxious to get me to reject you today. Why?”

“I told you—because I hate you.”

“I understand that. But why are you trying to make *me* reject *you*?”

“Do we have to go through that again?” she asked. “Because that’s my pattern—according to you. I try to push people to the point where they reject

me, then I feel worthless and sorry for myself, and find a good excuse to punish myself. Isn't that it?"

"Approximately. But why are you doing it here today?"

"You must be a glutton for punishment, too," she said. "How many times must I say it?—I hate you, I loathe you, I despise you. Isn't that sufficient?"

"But why?"

"Because of what you made me do over the weekend."

"With Ben?"

"Ben!" she said contemptuously. "Of course not. What's that got to do with it? All that happened was that I went to bed with him. We slept together. It was good . . . wonderful. For the first time in my life I felt like a woman."

"Then what. . .?" I started to say.

"—Keep quiet!" she interrupted. "You wanted to know why I hate you and I'm telling you. It's got nothing to do with Ben or what happened Saturday night. It's about my mother. What we talked about last time . . . that's why I hate you so. She's haunted me all weekend. Since Saturday I can't get her out of my mind. I keep thinking about her—the awful life she had. And the way I treated her. Because you forced me to, I remembered things, terrible things I did to her . . . That's why I hate you—for making me remember." She turned on her side and looked at me over her shoulder. "And you," she

continued, “you bastard. . . you did it purposely. You fixed it so I’d remember how rotten I was to her. I’ve spent half my life trying to forget her and that goddam’ wheel chair. But no; you won’t let me. You brought her back from the grave to haunt me. That’s why I hate you so!”

This outburst exhausted Laura. Averting her head once more, she lay quietly for some minutes. Then she reached an arm behind her.

“Give me the Kleenex,” she commanded.

I gave her the box of tissues from the table by my chair. Removing one, she dabbed at her eyes.

“Let me have a cigarette,” she said, reaching behind her again.

I put my cigarettes and a box of matches in her hand. She lit up and smoked.

“It’s funny,” she said. “Funny how I’ve clung to everything I could find to keep on hating her. You see, I always blamed her for what happened. I always thought it was her fault my father left us. I made it out that she drove him away with her nagging and complaining. I’ve tried to hide from myself the fact that he was just no good—a lazy, chicken-chasing, selfish son-of-a-bitch. I excused him for his drinking and his neglect of us all those years. I thought, ‘Why not? Why shouldn’t he run around, stay out all night, have other women? After all, what good was she to him with those useless legs and

dried-up body?' I pushed out of my head the way he was before . . . before she got sick. The truth is he was never any different, always a bum. Even when I was small he was no good, no good to her and no good to us. But I loved him—God! how I loved that man. I could hardly wait for him to come home. Drunk, sober—it didn't matter to me. He made a fuss over me and that's why I loved him. She said I was his favorite: I guess I was. At least he made over me more than the others.

“When I'd hear them fighting, I always blamed her. ‘What's she picking on him for?’ I'd think. ‘Why doesn't she let him alone?’ And when he went away, I thought it was her fault. Ever since then, until Saturday, I thought it was her fault. And I made her suffer for it. I did mean things to her, things I never told you about, things I tried to forget—did forget—until this weekend. I did them to punish her for kicking him out, for depriving me of his love. His love!

“Would you like to hear one of the things I did? I've thought this one over for two days. . . . Maybe if I tell you I can get rid of it.”

. . . Every day on the way home from school she played the same game with herself. That was the reason she preferred to walk home alone. Because what if it happened when the other kids were around? How would she explain it to them? As far as they were concerned she didn't have a father. Even on the high-school admission blank, where it said: “Father—living or

dead—check one,” she had marked a big X over “dead.” So what would she say if, suddenly, he stepped out of a doorway, or came around a corner, or ran over from across the street—and grabbed her and kissed her like he used to? Could she say, “Girls, this is my father?” Of course not! It was better to walk home alone, like this, pretending he was in that alley near the bottom of the hill, or standing behind the coal truck, or hiding behind the newsstand by the subway entrance . . . or that those footsteps behind her—the ones she kept hearing but there was no one there when she turned around—were his footsteps.

The game was over. It ended in the hallway of the tenement house, the same house they had lived in all of her life. If he wasn’t here, in the smelly vestibule, on the sagging stairs, or standing expectantly on the first-floor landing in front of their door, the game had to end. And he wasn’t: he never was. . . .

She heard the radio as she climbed the stairs, and her insides contracted in a spasm of disgust. “The same thing,” she thought, “the same darned thing. Why can’t it be different for once, just for once?” With her shoulder she pushed open the door. It closed behind her with a bang; but Anna, sleeping in her chair as usual, hardly stirred.

Laura put her books down on the dresser, then switched the dial of the radio to “*off*” with a hard, vicious twist of her fingers. Crossing the room she

opened the closet, hung up her coat, and slammed the door hard, thinking, “So what if it wakes her? I hope it does!” But it didn’t.

On the way to the rear of the apartment she glanced briefly at her mother. In the wheel chair Anna slumped like an abandoned rag doll. Her peroxidized hair, showing gray and brown at the roots where it was parted, fell over her forehead. Her chin was on her breast, and from one corner of her mouth a trickle of spittle trailed to the collar of the shabby brown dress. The green sweater she wore was open; it hung about her thin shoulders in rumpled folds, and from its sleeves her skinny wrists and the fingers tipped with bright red nails protruded like claws of a chicken, clutching the worn arms of the chair. Passing her, Laura repressed an exclamation of contempt.

In the kitchen Laura poured herself a glass of milk and stood drinking it by the drain. When she had finished, she rinsed the glass under the tap. It fell from her hands and shattered against the floor.

“Is that you, Laura?” Anna called.

“Yeah.”

“Come here. I want you to do something for me.”

Laura sighed. “O.K. As soon as I clean up this mess.”

She dried her hands and walked into the front room. “What is it?” she asked.

Anna motioned with her head. "Over there, on the dresser," she said. "The check from the relief came. I wrote out the store order. You can stop on your way back and give the janitor the rent."

"All right," Laura said wearily. She took her coat from the closet. At the door to the hall she paused and turned to face Anna, who was already fumbling with the radio dial. "Anything else?" she asked, playing out their bimonthly game.

Anna smiled. "Yes," she said. "I didn't put it on the store list, but if they have some of those chocolate-covered caramels I like . . ."

Laura nodded and closed the door. Music from the radio chased her downstairs.

When she returned, laden with packages, she stopped in the bedroom only momentarily to turn down the volume of the radio. "The least you can do is play it quietly," she muttered. "I could hear it a block away."

In the kitchen, still wearing her coat, she disposed of the groceries.

"Did you get everything, Laura?" Anna called.

"Yeah."

"Pay the rent?"

"Uh-huh."

“Did they have any of those caramels?”

This time Laura didn't answer. Somewhere, deep inside, the low-burning flame of hate flickered to a new height.

“Laura!” Anna called.

“What d'you want?” the girl shouted angrily.

“I asked if you got my candy.”

About to reply, Laura's gaze fell to the remaining package on the porcelain-topped kitchen table. It seemed to hypnotize her, holding her eyes fast and drawing her hand toward its curled neck. Slowly her fingers untwisted the bag and plunged inside. When they emerged, they carried two squares of candy to her mouth. Without tasting, she chewed and swallowed rapidly.

Behind her Laura heard the shuffle of wheels. She turned to find Anna crossing the threshold of the bedroom. Snatching up the bag, the girl hurried into the dining room and faced her mother across the oval table.

“D'you have the candy?” Anna asked.

Laura nodded and held up the sack.

“Give it here,” Anna said, extending her hand.

Laura shook her head and put the hand with the paper bag behind her

back. Puzzled, Anna sent her chair around the table toward the girl, who waited until her mother came near, then moved quickly to the opposite side, placing the table between them again.

“What kind of nonsense is this?” Anna asked. In reply, Laura put another piece of candy in her mouth.

“Laura!” Anna demanded. “Give me my candy!” She gripped the wheels of her chair and spun them forward. It raced around the table after the girl, who skipped lightly before it. Three times Anna circled the table, chasing the elusive figure that regarded her with narrowed eyes. Exhausted, finally, she stopped. Across from her, Laura stuffed more candy into her mouth and chewed violently.

“Laura,” Anna panted, “what’s got into you? Why are you doing this?”

Laura took the bag from behind her back and held it temptingly over the table. “If you want it so bad,” she said, breathing hard, “come get it.” She shook the bag triumphantly. “See,” she said, “it’s almost all gone. You’d better hurry.”

Inside, at the very core of her being, the flame was leaping. A warm glow of exultation swept through her, filling her body with a sense of power and setting her nerves on fire. She felt like laughing, like screaming, like dancing madly. In her mouth the taste of chocolate was intoxicating.

Her mother whimpered. “Give me the candy. . . . Please, Laura.”

Laura held the bag high. “Come and get it!” she screamed, and backed away slowly toward the front room.

Anna spun her chair in pursuit. By the time she reached the bedroom, Laura was at the door. She waited until her mother’s chair came close, then she whirled and ran through, pulling the door behind her with a loud crash.

Leaning against the banister, Laura listened to the thud of Anna’s fists against the wood and her sobs of angry frustration. The wild exhilaration mounted. Hardly conscious of her actions, she crammed the remaining candies into her mouth. Then, from deep in her body, a wave of laughter surged upward. She tried to stop it, but it broke through in a crazy tide of hilarity. The sound of this joyless mirth rebounded from the stair well and echoed from the ceiling of the narrow hallway—as it was to echo, thereafter, along with the sound of footsteps and falling rain, in her dreams. . . .

The weeks following the crucial hours I have just described were very difficult ones for Laura. As she worked through the guilt-laden memories now released from repression, her self-regard, never at any time very high, fell lower and lower. Bitterly, she told the ugly rosary of her pathetic past, not sparing herself (or me) the slightest detail. In a confessional mood, she recited all her faults of behavior—toward her family, her friends, her teachers, her associates—throughout the years. Under the influence of newly

acquired but undigested insights the pattern of her sessions with me changed. No longer did she find it necessary to pour out the acid of her hate and contempt, to vilify and condemn me and the world for our lack of love for her. Now she swung the pendulum to the other side: everyone had been too nice to her, too tolerant; she didn't deserve anyone's good opinion, particularly mine.

In keeping with her new mood, Laura also changed the style of her life. She became rigidly ascetic in her dress, adopted a strict diet, gave up smoking, drinking, cosmetics, dancing and all other ordinary amusements. The decision to surrender the novel joys of sex with her lover, Ben, was hard to make, but, tight-lipped and grim with determination, she declared her intention to him and stuck by her word.

For my part, in these weeks of confession and penitential repentance I remained silent and still permissive, revealing nothing of my own thoughts or feelings. I neither commented on the "sins" Laura recounted nor the expiatory measures she employed to discharge them. Instead, as I listened, I tried to reformulate her neurosis in terms of the dynamic information available to us at that point. Naturally, I saw through the recent shift in analytic content and behavior: it was, of course, but a variant of the old design, only implemented by conscious, deliberate techniques. Fundamentally, Laura was still Laura. That she now chose to destroy herself and her relationships in a more circumspect and less obvious fashion; that the weapons she now turned upon herself

were regarded—at least by the world outside the analytic chamber—in the highest terms, altered not one whit the basic fact that the core of her neurosis, despite our work, remained intact. Laura, in short, was still profoundly disturbed, still a martyr to secret desires that had not been plumbed.

She did not think so—nor did her friends. As a matter of fact, they were astonished at what they called her “progress,” and word reached me that my reputation in Baltimore—an intimate city where who is going to which analyst is always a lively topic at parties—had soared to new heights. And, indeed, to the casual observer Laura seemed improved. In the curious jargon of the analytic sophisticate, she was “making an adjustment.” Her rigorous diet, her severity of manner and dress, her renunciation of all fleshly joys and amusements, her sobriety and devotion to “serious” pursuits, above all her maintenance of a “good” relationship with the eligible Ben (*without sex*, it was whispered)—these were taken as tokens of far-reaching and permanent alterations in personality due to the “miracle” of psychoanalysis. Those with whom she came in contact during this time of course never bothered to peer beneath the mask of public personality she wore. They were content to take her at face value. Because she no longer disrupted their gatherings with demonstrations of her well-known “bitchiness,” because she no longer thrust her problems on them or called for their help in times of distress, they felt relieved in their consciences about her. In brief, without laboring the point, so long as Laura disturbed no one else and kept her misery to herself; and so

long as she represented to her associates the passive surrender to the mass ideal each one of them so desperately but fruitlessly sought, just as long were they impressed by the “new look” that Laura wore.

But we knew, Laura and I, that the battle had yet to be joined, for only we knew what went on behind the closed doors of 907 in the Latrobe Building. In this room the masks fell away: either they were discarded because here they could not hide the truth, or they were taken from her by the soft persuasion of continuous self-examination with insight. The first to go was the last she had assumed: the defensive mask of self-abnegation.

The time came when I found it necessary to call a halt to Laura’s daily *mea culpas*, to put a stop to the marathon of confession she had entered at the beginning of her second year with me. Three factors influenced my decision to force her, at last, off the new course her analysis had taken. The first and most important of these was my perception of the danger implicit in this program of never-ending self-denunciation. As she searched her memory for fresh evidence of guilt, I could see how overwhelmed she was becoming by the enormity of her past behavior. Try as she might, I knew she could never salve her conscience by the penitential acts and renunciations she invented, and I feared the outcome of a prolonged contest between contrition and atonement; it could only lead to the further debility of her ego, to a progressive lowering of self-esteem which might wind up at a point I dared not think about.

The second and hardly less important reason why I felt I had to urge Laura away from this attempt to thrive herself in the manner she chose was the simple fact of its unproductiveness for therapy. As I have already said, this psychic gambit of self-abnegation only substituted one set of neurotic symptoms for another and left the basic pathological structure untouched. Moreover, it provided precisely the same kind of neurotic satisfaction she had been securing all along by her old techniques. The martyrdom she now suffered by her own hand was equivalent to the self-pity formerly induced by the rejection she had unconsciously arranged to obtain from others. And while it is true that she no longer exercised hate, hostility and aggressive contempt outwardly, it was only the direction in which these negative elements were discharged that had been altered: they remained.

Finally, my decision was also influenced by sheer fatigue and boredom with what I knew to be only an act, a disguise of behavior and attitude adopted to squeeze the last ounce of neurotic gratification from me and the entire world which, by psychic extension from love- withholding parents, she viewed as rejecting and denying. To tell the truth, I became tired of the “new” Laura, weary of her pious pretenses, and a trifle nauseated with the holier-than-thou manner she assumed. And while this was the least of my reasons for doing what I did, I hold it chiefly responsible for the almost fatal error in timing I committed when I finally acted on an otherwise carefully weighed decision to eject my patient from the analytic rut in which she was, literally,

wallowing.

The session that precipitated the near catastrophe took place on a Thursday afternoon. Laura was the last patient I was to see that day, since I was taking the Congressional Limited to New York where I was scheduled to conduct a seminar that night and give a lecture on Friday. I was looking forward to the trip which, for me, represented a holiday from work and the first break in routine in many months. Something of this mood of impatience to get going and pleasurable anticipation must have been communicated to Laura, for she began her hour with a hardly disguised criticism of my manner and appearance.

“Somehow,” she said after composing herself on the couch, “somehow you seem different today.”

“I do?”

“Yes.” She turned to look at me. “Maybe it’s because of the way you’re dressed. . . . That’s a new suit, isn’t it?”

“No,” I said. “I’ve worn it before.”

“I don’t remember ever seeing it.” She resumed her usual position. “Anyway, you look nice.”

“Thank you.”

“I like to see people look nice,” she continued. “When a person gets all

dressed up, it makes them feel better. I think it's because they think other people will judge them on the basis of their outer appearance—and if the outer appearance is pleasing and nice, people will think what's behind is pleasing and nice, too—and being thought of that way makes you feel better. Don't you think so?"

I was lost in the convolutions of this platitude, but its inference was pretty clear.

"What exactly are you getting at?" I asked.

She shrugged. "It's not important," she said. "Just a thought. . ." There was a moment of silence, then, "Oh!" she exclaimed. "I know why you're all dressed up. . . . Today's the day you go to New York, isn't it?"

"That's right," I said.

"That means I won't see you on Saturday, doesn't it?"

"Yes. I won't be back until Monday."

"Is the lecture on Saturday?"

"No, the lecture's tomorrow, Friday."

"—But you're going to stay over until Monday. . . . Well, I think the rest will do you good. You need it. I think everyone needs to kick up his heels once in a while, just get away, have some fun and forget everything—if he can."

The dig at my irresponsibility toward my patients, particularly Laura, and the implication that I was going to New York to participate in some kind of orgy, were not lost on me.

"I hate to miss an hour," Laura continued in the same melancholy tone she had been using since this meeting began. "Especially now. I feel I really need to come here now. There's so much to talk about."

"In that case," I said, "you should take more advantage of the time you're here. For example, you're not using this hour very well, are you?"

"Perhaps not," she said. "It's just that I feel this is the wrong time for you to be going away."

"Now look here, Laura," I said. "You've known about missing the Saturday hour for more than a week. Please don't pretend it's a surprise to you. And, besides, it's only one hour."

"I know," she sighed. "I know. But it feels like you're going away forever. . . . What if I should need you?"

"I don't think you will. . . . But if you should, you can call my home or the office here and they'll put you in touch with me."

I lit a cigarette and waited for her to go on. With the first inhalation, however, I began to cough. Laura again turned around.

"Can I get you something?" she asked. "A glass of water?"

“No, thank you,” I answered.

“That cough of yours worries me,” she said when the spasm had passed and I was once more quiet. “You should give up smoking. I did, you know. It’s been two months since I had a cigarette. And my cough’s all gone. I think that’s the best of it—no more coughing. I feel fine. You should really try it.”

I continued to smoke in silence, wondering where she would take this theme. Before long, I found out.

“It wasn’t easy. The first two weeks were agony, but I determined not to give in. After all, I had a reason. . . .”

“To stop coughing?” I suggested, permitting myself the small satisfaction of retaliating for her deliberate provocation of the past half hour.

“Of course not!” she exclaimed. “You know very well I had good reasons for giving up smoking—and other things too.”

“What were they?” I asked.

“You of all people should know,” she said.

“Tell me.”

“Well—it’s just that I want to be a better person. If you’ve been listening to everything I’ve said these past weeks you know how I used to behave. Now I want to make amends for it, to be different, better. . . .”

“And you think giving up smoking and so on will make you a better person?”

She fell silent. Glancing over at her, I noticed the rigidity of her body. Her hands, until now held loosely on her lap, were clenched into fists. I looked at my watch and cursed myself for a fool. Only ten minutes left and a train to catch! Why had I let myself rise to the bait? Why had I permitted this to come up now, when it couldn't be handled? Was there any way out, any way to avoid the storm I had assisted her to brew? I put my trust in the gods that care for idiots and took a deep breath.

“Well?” I asked.

“Nothing I do is right,” she said hollowly. “There's no use trying. I just make it worse.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Myself,” she said. “Myself and the mess I make of everything. I try to do what's right—but I never can. I think I'm working it all out—but I'm not. I'm just getting in deeper and deeper. It's too much for me, too much. . . .”

When the hour ended, I rose and held the door open for her.

“I'll see you Monday,” I said.

Her eyes were glistening. “Have a good time,” she sighed.

On the train to New York I thought about Laura and the hour just ended, reviewing it word for word and wondering just where I had made my mistake. That I had committed a serious error I had no doubt, and it hardly needed Laura's abrupt change of mood to bring this to my attention. To mobilize guilt and anxiety just prior to a recess in therapy is in itself unwise. In this instance, I had compounded the blunder by losing control over myself and responding, as I seldom do in the treatment situation, to criticism and provocation. I asked myself—had she touched some peculiarly sensitive chord in me? Am I so susceptible to faultfinding? Have I, all unaware, become especially tender on the subject of my incessant smoking? my cough? my responsibility to my patients? my appearance? Or was it, as I suspected then and am sure of now, that I had made the decision to contrive a directional change in Laura's analysis but had been incited to violate the timetable of therapy by an unexpected display of the fatuousness that had become her prevailing defense?

That evening I had dinner with friends and conducted the scheduled seminar, after which many of us gathered for a series of nightcaps and further discussion in a colleague's home. I had forgotten all about Laura by the time I returned to my hotel, and when the desk clerk gave me a message to call a certain long-distance operator in Baltimore, I thought it would concern only something personal at home or a communication from my office. I was surprised when Laura's voice came over the wire.

“Dr. Lindner?”

“Yes, Laura. What is it?”

“I’ve been trying to get you for hours.”

“I’m sorry. Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know. I just wanted to talk with you.”

“What about?”

“About the way I feel. . . .”

“How do you feel?”

“Scared.”

“Scared of what?”

“I don’t know. Just scared, I guess. Of nothing in particular-just everything. . . . I don’t like being alone.”

“But you’re alone most other nights, aren’t you?” I asked.

“Yes . . . but somehow it’s different tonight.”

“Why?”

“Well, for one thing, you’re not in Baltimore.”

The line was silent as I waited for her to continue.

“And then,” she said, “I think you’re angry with me.”

“Why do you think that?”

“The way I acted this afternoon. It was mean of me, I know. But I couldn’t help it. Something was egging me on.”

“What was it?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t figured it out. Something . . .”

“We’ll talk about it Monday,” I said.

More silence. I thought I heard noises as if she were crying.

“Do you forgive me?” she sobbed.

“We’ll review the whole hour on Monday,” I said, seeking a way out of this awkward situation. “Right now you’d better get to bed.”

“All right,” she said meekly. “I’m sorry I bothered you.”

“No bother at all,” I said. “Good night, Laura”—and hung up with relief.

I gave the lecture on Friday afternoon, and when it was over returned to my room for a nap before beginning my holiday with dinner in a favorite restaurant and a long-anticipated evening at the theater. In the quiet room, I bathed and lay down for a peaceful interlude of sleep. Hardly had I begun to doze when the phone rang. It was my wife, calling from Baltimore. Laura, she said, had slashed her wrists: I had better come home—quick. . . .

The doctor and I sat in the corner of the room, talking in whispers. On the bed, heavily sedated, Laura breathed noisily. Even in the dim light the pallor of her face was discernible, and I could see a faint white line edging her lips. On the blanket her hands lay limply. The white bandages at her wrists forced themselves accusingly on my attention. From time to time her hands twitched.

“I doubt that it was a serious attempt,” the physician was saying, “although of course you never know. It’s harder than you think, trying to get out that way. You’ve really got to mean it—you’ve got to mean it enough to saw away hard to get down where it counts. I don’t think she tried very hard. The cut on the left wrist is fairly deep, but not deep enough, and the ones on the right wrist are superficial. There wasn’t a hell of a lot of blood, either.”

“I understand you got there awfully fast,” I said.

“Pretty fast,” he replied. “What happened was this: Right after she slashed herself she began screaming. A neighbor ran in and had the good sense to call me immediately. My office is in the same building, on the first floor, and I happened to be there at the time. I rushed upstairs, took a look at the cuts and saw they weren’t too bad—”

“They were made with a razor blade, weren’t they?” I interrupted. “Yes,” he said, and then continued, “so I slapped a couple of tourniquets on, phoned the hospital that I was sending her in, then called the ambulance. I followed it

here to Sinai. In the Accident Room they cleaned her up and had her wrists sutured by the time I arrived. She was still quite excited, so I decided to put her in for a day or two. I gave her a shot of morphine and sent her upstairs.”

“Who called my home?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Before the ambulance came, her neighbor called Laura’s sister and told her what happened and what I was going to do. I think the sister tried to get hold of you.”

“I guess so,” I said. “She knows Laura’s in treatment with me.”

“I don’t envy you,” he said. “She’s a lulu.”

“What did she do?”

He shrugged and motioned toward the bed with a wave of his hand. “This kind of business, for one thing. Then the way she carried on until the shot took effect.”

“What did she do?”

“Oh,” he said vaguely, “she kept screaming and throwing herself around. Pretty wild.” He stood up. “I don’t think you’ve got anything to worry about as far as her physical condition goes, though. She’ll be fine in the morning. Maybe a little groggy, that’s all.”

“I’m very grateful to you,” I said.

“Not at all,” he said on his way from the room. “There’ll be some business with the police tomorrow. If you need me, just call.”

Laura had her hour on Saturday—in the hospital. During it and many subsequent sessions we worked out the reasons for her extravagant, self-destructive gesture. As the physician had observed, her act was hardly more than a dramatic demonstration without serious intent, although in the way of such things it could well have miscarried to a less fortunate conclusion. Its immediate purpose was to recall me from my holiday and to reawaken the sympathetic attention she believed herself to have prejudiced by her hostile provocativeness on Thursday. But the whole affair, we learned subsequently, had much deeper roots.

The motivation behind Laura’s attempt at suicide was twofold. Unconsciously, it represented an effort to reenact, with a more satisfying outcome, the desertion of her father; and, at the same time, it served the function of providing extreme penance for so-called “sins” of behavior and thought-crimes between the ages of twelve and twenty- four. So far as the first of these strange motivations is concerned, it is understandable how Laura interpreted my brief interruption of therapy as an abandonment similar to that abrupt and permanent earlier departure of her father. This time, however, as indicated by the phone call to my hotel on the night I left, she believed herself to have been at least in part responsible for it, to have driven him (in the person of the analyst) away. To call him back, her

distraught mind conceived the suicidal act, which was nothing less than a frenzied effort-planned, so it appeared, but not executed, more than a decade before—to repeat the original drama but insure a different and more cordial ending.

The mad act was also powered dynamically by the fantastic arithmetic of confession and penance that Laura, like some demented accountant, had invented to discharge her guilty memories. As I had feared when the pattern became clear to me, the mental balance sheet she was keeping with her hourly testaments of culpability and the increasing asceticism of her life could never be stabilized. Self-abnegation had to lead to a martyrdom of some kind. My effort to prevent this miscarried—not because it was misconceived, but because it was so sloppily executed. My own unconscious needs—the residual infantilisms and immaturities within me—in this case subverted judgment and betrayed me into the commission of a timing error that could have cost Laura’s life.

We both profited from this terrible experience and, in the end, it proved to have been something of a boon to each of us. I, of course, would have preferred to learn my lesson otherwise. As for Laura, she made a rapid recovery and returned to the analysis much sobered by her encounter with death. Apart from all else, the episode provided her with many genuine and useful insights, not the least of which were those that led her to abandon her false asceticism and to stop playing the role of the “well-analyzed,” “adjusted”

paragon among her friends.

The events just described furnished us with vast quantities of material for analysis in subsequent months. Particularly as it referred directly to the situation in psychoanalysis known technically as the “transference neurosis”—or the reflection in therapy of former patterns of relationship with early, significant figures in the life of the patient—the suicidal gesture Laura made led to an even deeper investigation of her existing neurotic attitudes and behavior. And as we dealt with this topic of transference—the organic core of every therapeutic enterprise; as we followed its meandering course through our sessions together, Laura rapidly made new and substantial gains. With every increase in her understanding another rich facet of personality was disclosed, and the burden of distress she had borne for so long became lighter and lighter.

The metamorphosis of Laura was a fascinating thing to observe. I, as the human instrument of changes that were taking place in her, was immensely gratified. Nevertheless, my pleasure and pride were in complete, for I remained annoyingly aware that we had yet to find the explanation for the single remaining symptom that had so far evaded the influence of therapy. No progress at all had been made against the strange complaint which brought her into treatment: the seizures of uncontrollable hunger, the furious eating, and their dreadful effects.

I had my own theory about this stubborn symptom and was often tempted to follow the suggestion of a certain “school” of psychoanalysis and communicate my ideas to Laura. However, because I felt—and still feel—that such technique is theoretically unjustified—a reflection of the therapist’s insecurity and impatience rather than a well-reasoned approach to the problems of psychotherapy—because I felt this way, I determined to curb my eagerness to bring Laura’s chief symptom into focus by testing my interpretations on her. In adherence to methods in which I have been trained, therefore, I held my tongue and waited developments. Fortunately, they were not long in appearing; and when they did arrive, in one mighty tide of insight my patient’s being was purged of the mental debris that had made her existence a purgatory.

Laura was seldom late for appointments, nor had she ever missed one without canceling for good cause well in advance. On this day, therefore, when she failed to appear at the appointed time I grew somewhat anxious. As the minutes passed, my concern mounted. Finally, after a half hour had sped and there was still no sign of Laura, I asked my secretary to call her apartment. There was no answer.

During the afternoon, caught up in work with other patients, I gave only a few passing thoughts to Laura’s neglect to keep her hour or to inform me she would be absent. When I reminded myself of it at the close of the day, I tried, in a casual way, to recall her previous session and examine it for some

clue to this unusual delinquency. Since none came readily, I pushed the matter from my mind and prepared to leave the office.

We were in the corridor awaiting the elevator when we heard the telephone. I was minded to let it ring, but Jeanne, more compulsive in such matters than I, insisted on returning to answer. While I held the elevator, she reentered the office. A few moments later she reappeared, shrugging her shoulders in answer to my question.

“Must have been a wrong number,” she said. “When I answered all I heard was a funny noise and then the line went dead.”

I arrived home shortly after six o'clock and dressed to receive the guests who were coming for dinner. While in the shower, I heard the ringing of the telephone, which my wife answered. On emerging from the bathroom, I asked her who had called.

“That was the queerest thing,” she said. “The party on the other end sounded like a drunk and I couldn't make out a word.”

During dinner I was haunted by a sense of unease. While attending to the lively conversation going on around me, and participating in it as usual, near the edges of consciousness something nagged uncomfortably. I cannot say that I connected the two mysterious calls with Laura and her absence from the hour that day, but I am sure they contributed to the vague and fitful feelings I experienced. In any case, when the telephone again rang while we

were having our coffee, I sprang from my place and rushed to answer it myself.

I lifted the receiver and said, "Hello?" Over the wire, in response, came a gurgling, throaty noise which, even in retrospect defies comparison with any sound I have ever heard. Unmistakably produced by the human voice, it had a gasping, breathless quality, yet somehow seemed animal in nature. It produced a series of meaningless syllables, urgent in tone but unidentifiable.

"Who is this?" I demanded.

There was a pause, then, laboriously, I heard the first long-drawn syllable of her name.

"Laura"! I said. "Where are you?"

Again the pause, followed by an effortful intake of breath and its expiration as if through a hollow tube: "Home . . ."

"Is something wrong?"

It seemed to come easier this time.

"Eat-ing."

"Since when?"

"... Don't—know."

"How d'you feel?" I asked, aware of the absurdity of the question but

desperately at a loss to know what else to say.

“Aw-ful. . . No—more—food . . . Hun-gry . . .”

My mind raced. What could I do? What was there to do?

“Help—me,” she said—and I heard the click of the instrument as it fell into its cradle.

“Laura,” I said. “Wait!”—But the connection had been broken and my words echoed in my own ears. Hastily, I hung up and searched through the telephone directory for her number. My fingers spun the dial. After an interval, I heard the shrill buzz of her phone. Insistently, it repeated itself, over and over. There was no answer.

I knew, then, what I had to do. Excusing myself from our guests, I got my car and drove to where Laura lived. On the way there, I thought about what some of my colleagues would say of what I was doing. No doubt they would be appalled by such a breach of orthodoxy and speak pontifically of “counter-transference,” my “anxiety” at Laura’s “acting out,” and other violations of strict procedure. Well, let them. To me, psychoanalysis is a vital art that demands more of its practitioners than the clever exercise of their brains. Into its practice also goes the heart, and there are occasions when genuine human feelings take precedence over the rituals and dogmas of the craft.

I searched the mailboxes in the vestibule for Laura’s name, then ran up

the stairs to the second floor. In front of her door I paused and put my ear against the metal frame to listen. I heard nothing.

I pushed the button. Somewhere inside a chime sounded. A minute passed while I waited impatiently. I rang again, depressing the button forcefully time after time. Still no one came to the door. Finally, I turned the knob with one hand and pounded the panel with the flat of the other. In the silence that followed, I heard the noise of something heavy crashing to the floor, then the sibilant shuffling of feet.

I put my mouth close to the crack where door met frame.

“Laura!” I called. “Open the door!”

Listening closely, I heard what sounded like sobs and faint moaning, then a voice that slowly pronounced the words, “Go—away.”

I shook the knob violently. “Open up!” I commanded. “Let me in!”

The knob turned in my hand and the door opened. I pushed against it, but a chain on the jamb caught and held. In the dim light of the hallway, against the darkness inside, something white shone. It was Laura’s face, but she withdrew it quickly.

“Go—away,” she said in a thick voice.

“No.”

“Please!”

She leaned against the door, trying to close it again. I put my foot in the opening.

“Take that chain off,” I said with all the authority I could muster. “At once!”

The chain slid away and I walked into the room. It was dark, and I could make out only vague shapes of lamps and furniture. I fumbled along the wall for the light switch. Before my fingers found it, Laura, who was hardly more than an indistinguishable blur of whiteness by my side, ran past me into the room beyond.

I discovered the switch and turned on the light. In its sudden, harsh glare I surveyed the room. The sight was shocking. Everywhere I looked there was a litter of stained papers, torn boxes, empty bottles, open cans, broken crockery and dirty dishes. On the floor and on the tables large puddles gleamed wetly. Bits of food—crumbs, gnawed bones, fish-heads, sodden chunks of unknown stuffs—were strewn all about. The place looked as if the contents of a garbage can had been emptied in it, and the stench was sickening.

I swallowed hard against a rising wave of nausea and hurried into the room where Laura had disappeared. In the shaft of light that came through an archway, I saw a rumped bed, similarly piled with rubbish. In a corner, I

made out the crouching figure of Laura.

By the entrance I found the switch and pressed it. As the light went on, Laura covered her face and shrank against the wall. I went over to her, extending my hands.

“Come,” I said. “Stand up.”

She shook her head violently. I bent down and lifted her to her feet. When she stood up, her fingers still hid her face. As gently as I could, I pulled them away. Then I stepped back and looked at Laura. What I saw, I will never forget.

The worst of it was her face. It was like a ceremonial mask on which some inspired maniac had depicted every corruption of the flesh. Vice was there, and gluttony; lust also, and greed. Depravity and abomination seemed to ooze from great pores that the puffed tautness of skin revealed.

I closed my eyes momentarily against this apparition of incarnate degradation. When I opened them, I saw the tears welling from holes where her eyes should have been. Hypnotized, I watched them course in thin streams down the bloated cheeks and fall on her nightgown. And then, for the first time, I saw it!

Laura was wearing a night robe of some sheer stuff that fell loosely from straps at her shoulders. Originally white, it was now soiled and stained with

the evidence of her orgy. But my brain hardly registered the begrimed garment, except where it bulged below her middle in a sweeping arc, ballooning outward from her body as if she were pregnant.

I gasped with disbelief—and my hand went out automatically to touch the place where her nightgown swelled. My fingers encountered a softness that yielded to their pressure. Questioning, I raised my eyes to that caricature of a human face. It twisted into what I took for a smile. The mouth opened and closed to form a word that it labored to pronounce.

“Ba-by,” Laura said.

“Baby?” I repeated. “Whose baby?”

“Laur-ra’s ba-by. . . . Lo-ok.”

She bent forward drunkenly and grasped her gown by the hem. Slowly she raised the garment, lifting it until her hands were high above her head. I stared at her exposed body. There, where my fingers had probed, a pillow was strapped to her skin with long bands of adhesive.

Laura let the nightgown fall. Swaying, she smoothed it where it bulged.

“See?” she said. “Looks—real—this way.”

Her hands went up to cover her face again. Now great sobs shook her, and tears poured through her fingers as she cried. I led her to the bed and sat on its edge with her, trying to order the turmoil of my thoughts while she

wept. Soon the crying ceased, and she bared her face again. Once more the lost mouth worked to make words.

“I—want—a—baby,” she said, and fell over on the bed—asleep.

I covered Laura with a blanket and went into the other room, where I remembered seeing a telephone. There, I called a practical nurse who had worked with me previously and whom I knew would be available. Within a half hour, she arrived. I briefed her quickly: the apartment was to be cleaned and aired: when Laura awakened, the doctor who lived downstairs was to be called to examine her and advise on treatment and diet: she was to report to me regularly, and in two days she was to bring Laura to my office. Then I left.

Although the night was cold I lowered the top on my car. I drove home slowly, breathing deeply of the clean air.

Two days later, while her nurse sat in the outer room, Laura and I began to put together the final pieces in the puzzle of her neurosis. As always, she had only a vague, confused memory of events during her seizure, recollecting them hazily through a fog of total intoxication. Until I recounted the episode, she had no clear remembrance of my visit and thought she had dreamed my presence in her rooms. Of the portion that concerned her pitiful imitation of pregnancy, not the slightest memorial trace remained.

It was clear that Laura’s compelling desire was to have a child, that her feelings of emptiness arose from this desire, and that her convulsions of

ravenous appetite were unconsciously designed to produce its illustory satisfaction. What was not immediately apparent, however, was why this natural feminine wish underwent such extravagant distortion in Laura's case, why it had become so intense, and why it had to express itself in a manner at once monstrous, occult and self-destructive.

My patient herself provided the clue to these focal enigmas when, in reconstructing the episode I had witnessed, she made a slip of the tongue so obvious in view of the facts that it hardly required interpretation.

It was about a week after the incident I have recorded. Laura and I were reviewing it again, looking for further clues. I was intrigued by the contrivance she wore that night to simulate the appearance of a pregnant woman, and asked for details about its construction. Laura could supply none. Apparently, she said, she had fashioned it in an advanced stage of her intoxication from food.

"Was this the first time you made anything like that?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said, somewhat hesitantly. "I can't be sure. Maybe I did and destroyed the thing before I came out of the fog. It seems to me I remember finding something like you describe a couple of years ago after an attack, but I didn't know—or didn't want to know—what it was, so I just took it apart and forgot about it."

"You'd better look around the apartment carefully," I said, half joking.

“Perhaps there’s a spare hidden away someplace.”

“I doubt it,” she replied in the same mood. “I guess I have to make a new baby every . . .” Her hand went over her mouth. “My God!” she exclaimed. “Did you hear what I just said?”

Mike was her father’s name; and of course it was his baby she wanted. It was for this impossible fulfillment that Laura hungered—and now was starved no more. . . .