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The Night We Met Mom's Analyst

A few weeks ago, my mother called to invite me to my parents' house in the suburbs for dinner and announced that the guest of honor would be Dr. Jacob Stump—her former psychoanalyst, whom she had not seen since the early 70's and whom she had never seen socially.

"I'm so excited," she said in a tone one might use on hearing that a favorite meal would be served. I politely shared her enthusiasm, while horrible images of reminiscence over her biggest breakthroughs flew into my head.

"But what will we talk about?" I asked.
"I don't know. Whatever comes into our heads," she said, without irony.

I cringed at the stupid jokes that might be made to break the tension—*So, maybe we should eat on the couch, ha, ha, ha!* I rolled my eyes over the prospect of my every move being placed under the Freudian microscope—*Ah, dear girl, notice how you grip your corn on the cob!*

But mostly, I panicked that this casual dinner might actually reveal some family neurosis that I would rather stay safely hidden.

I should mention that I grew up in a state of perpetual psychoanalysis. Not because I was always in therapy, and not because my parents were analysts—they just thought they were. They were part of that 60's crowd who traded the afterwork drink for daytime epiphanies at Dr. So-and-so's office uptown. As a child, every one of my actions had two meanings: the spoken and the unspoken. Spilled milk showed clumsiness—and the possibility of "acting out" a deep fear of enrichment. Forgotten mittens were always a sign of "separation anxiety." When a kindergarten teacher told my parents I seemed to be "holding back" in school, they nervously sent me off to a doctor who suggested to their horror that I re-explore my anal stage by playing with brown clay. (I'm convinced this remedy is why today I have a perpetual pile of clothes on my bedroom floor.)

While in most families the word psychoanalysis used to be spoken in a whisper, in mine it constituted a religion—confession with a bill. The unconscious is the closest thing I know to a "God." Absolute faith in the mind's inner workings is the only guarantee to a happy future. Rather than numbing the past with cocktails—or pressing it neatly between pages of a photo album—my family has always purged it in a voluble stream of free associations and dream interpretations.

Still, I was floored when my mother called. Why had a life of healthy self-observation suddenly taken this absurdist turn?

Although I had never laid eyes on him, Dr. Stump played an enormous role in my childhood. My mother would refer to him mysteriously as "the man who saved my life." She called him "My Dr. Stump."

I never knew why my mother needed therapy—sure, there were murmurs of an irrational fear of pigeons, and some comments about being raised in an uncommunicative family. (When my mother was a teenager, she told her mother that she thought she needed to talk to a psychiatrist. Her mother replied that she was being silly and "it was all her head.")

So in my childhood, Dr. Stump became a character up there with Burt and Ernie and my favorite doll Lakey. When I was 10, my father arranged an Easter treasure hunt. One clue read, "Mom's talking doctor." I finally figured it out, and indeed found a basket of purple jelly beans sitting on the stump of a dead tree in our backyard.

So this mythic figure from my (and my mother's) past was about to become real. *Is nothing sacred?* I thought. In her day, such a social meeting between patient and analyst would have had Freudians reeling. Now, she was the one pushing for it, and I was the one who was feeling old-fashioned. I tried to talk myself out of my skepticism. After all, people are more open now about therapy: 12 steps on the Stairmaster. I'll always remember when my college roommate's father told me, in a casual phone conversation, that he had an enormous breakthrough about his mother in that day's session.

A FEW YEARS BACK, MY MOTHER HAD INVITED DR. STUMP to her 40th-birthday party. He declined, saying he might feel uncomfortable introducing himself as "the birthday girl's psychoana-



lyst." Instead, they stayed in touch through the mail.

Recently, Dr. Stump had written that he was retiring and moving out of state. My mother suggested the dinner; "I want him at last to meet my family," she told me. This time, he not only accepted—but planned to bring his wife. Mom told me this meeting was her dream come true. I asked her what I should wear.

In the first half-hour, Dr. Stump and Mom barely spoke. My brother and I tried to look as well adjusted as possible, while stealing glances at the good doctor and his wife. He was a gray-haired, compact, grandfatherly man; she was a thin, suburban housewife type: khaki skirt, short hair. They were both originally from the Midwest. He was very quiet. His wife did most of the talking.

Mom hung around the periphery, preparing the table, while my father made small talk about our cats. We had ordered Chinese from our favorite restaurant. Mom wasn't saying much. I empathized, thinking, *How can you make small talk with a person with whom you've spent years baring your soul?*

I felt surprisingly comfortable. Dr. Stump's silence seemed to come more out of shyness than stiff Freudian observation. When he did finally speak up, the conversation didn't even drift near Freudian slips or my mother's analysis. Dr. Stump did offer that a few years ago, he had attended a former patient's funeral and discovered that "her mother was in fact worse than she had described." My mother laughed.

Mostly, Dr. Stump spoke warmly about his imminent retirement. He said he planned to throw out most of his old books, except those

by Freud. We talked about sailing, his children and the different places we had traveled in the world. It felt more like a dinner with my grandparents than the embarrassing satire I had imagined.

Ironically, in the end, I was the one who reached for the psychological fortune cookie. A few weeks earlier, my boyfriend of two and half years had suddenly dumped me. His only explanation: My personality was too big for him. A month later, while he was visiting his parents, I called him to try to work things out for the last time. But his

mother finished the job: She volunteered that he had just "met a nice young gal." And, I told Dr. Stump, I later found out this wasn't even true.

We ended up spending a large part of the dinner discussing my bruised ego. I ranted, Dr. Stump listened. I took a deep breath, expecting to hear Dr. Stump say something profound, like "Clearly, the boy had a weak mother and you overwhelmed him." Or at least some allusion to "vagina dentata." But instead he turned to me and said, simply, "Well, clearly, the man is too small, and he ain't for you, either."

At that moment, I understood why my mother had stayed in touch with Dr. Stump, and why she had asked him to dinner.

Just before the Stumps left, my mother nudged me and told me to tell Dr. Stump that certain of her family members were really as bad as she had described them. I assured him. Mom gleamed.