

# Déjà Vu

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## ABSTRACT

The following short story represents one psychologist's attempt to describe in narrative form what can occur when we find ourselves wanting to "rescue" our clients. This narrative is an example of the oft-described dictum that one cannot be a professional counsellor to friends. However, the story tells more than that. More than anything else, it illustrates that, for our clients, the obstacles to psychological healing can be our own perceptions and expectations of their eventual recovery. After four years of visiting with a friend who was incapacitated by anxiety and depression, this psychologist's expectations for a slow reconstruction of healthy coping skills created an evening of mishap. The patient is doing fine; the doctor has some things on which to work now.

## RÉSUMÉ

La nouvelle suivante représente la tentative d'une psychologue de décrire sous forme d'une narration ce qui peut arriver lorsque nous voulons «sauver» nos clientes. Cette narration est un exemple de l'affirmation commune selon laquelle on ne peut pas offrir des services de counseling professionnels à ses amies. Cependant, cette nouvelle souligne surtout le fait que pour nos clientes, nos propres perceptions et attentes relatives leur rétablissement futur peuvent faire obstacle à leur guérison psychologique. Après quatre ans de visites chez une amie qui est rendue invalide par l'anxiété et la dépression, cette psychologue s'attend à un réapprentissage lent des habiletés d'adaptation saines. Une soirée, ces attentes mènent à une mésaventure. La patiente va bien, mais la psychologue a du chemin à faire maintenant.

**A**FTER YEARS OF SUFFERING FROM DEPRESSION and its incapacitating bouts of anxiety and isolation, a friend of mine felt herself beginning to turn the corner of enforced loneliness. To celebrate, she ordered tickets to a sellout concert of the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra and Procol Harum. I was invited to be her guest and we agreed to meet in the Jubilee's main lobby at 7:40 on Saturday night.

Before I left the house that evening, I had a foreboding sense that the event was going to be a disaster. The diarrhoea and cramps that hit me before getting dressed did not bode well. But I dressed, bade the household good-night and set off for an evening of just "the two of us." The Jubilee parking lot still had an amazing amount of space and I parked closer to the box office entrance than usual. That left me with the choice of entrances: box office or main lobby?

"Maybe she is still waiting in the line to pick up her tickets and I can catch her at the start. After all, I'm five minutes early."

The press of the crowd at the door caught me off guard; three, four lines of people excitedly gesturing and laughing with each other, reminiscing on the last time they had heard Procol Harum. I found myself three steps above the crowd, carefully checking the waiting lines for my friend. She was not there and so I cast about for her among the people who were moving away from the coat checkout towards the various lounges and lobbies. A sense of panic began to fill me as I wished we had been more specific than "main lobby." Slowly I walked through the smoking and non-smoking lounges, glancing at the sweat and t-shirt sales, avoiding the cameras from television interviewers, looking at every pillar and chair for evidence of the friend who must have succumbed to the anxiety that was beginning

to pervade my body. I finally arrived at the main lobby and stood irresolute in its centre, looking at every face that was gathered there, peering at those who were entering, wondering whether to take the escalator to the lower Kaasa theatre to find her crouched around a corner there.

“That would be silly. Why would she go down there? She must be lost somewhere in this exuberant mob and I must find her.”

“Coolheaded” logic now prevailed in my stomach pit as I walked back through the crowd to rescue her from her anxieties and be the true friend I had always been. The people seemed more familiar and calm as I once again walked to the box office, screened the waiting lines, walked into the darkest corners of the smoking lounges and found myself heading to the balconies.

I was going to be thorough — so thorough that no one would ever be able to accuse me of not doing my utmost to find her and be with her on this special evening. Climbing the stairs I walked back and forth along the first balcony lounge, even though I knew our seats were on the second balcony. There were clusters of people quietly talking, balancing their drinks in one hand while punctuating their conversations with the other. This seemed to be a more intimate crowd and I felt like an intruder as I walked between them. She was not one of them and I headed to the second balcony.

The carpeted treads and the hushed conversational tones that greeted me on the second floor invited me to pause in my search, to breathe deep and stay a while. But I could not, because I knew that my friend would now be wondering seriously why I had not showed up. I descended the stairs and headed back to the

main floor. The gong rang to announce that the performance would start in ten minutes. Slowly I headed to a point in the lounge and lobby where I could see both sets of doors and waited.

“Surely, she will gather strength to move now that the crowds are thinning. Surely, she will now appear.”

The lights began to flash after the announcers warned of five minutes remaining. I walked to the escalator and began the climb once more to the top, this time from the other side.

“Maybe she ducked into the washroom and is cowering there.”

There was no evidence of her in either ground, first, or second floor washrooms. By the time I arrived at the top of the second floor, the doors were closed, the ushers were talking quietly among themselves and I was the only one who once again traversed the whole of the lounge. The suit-clad woman who had been sitting in the window seat had also left. There was only one man left sitting in the main floor lounge and we only exchanged glances as I walked despondently to the telephones.

“What a disaster! I know that I should have picked her up at home! Why did we ever agree to meet here? Had she hoped to allow herself the final option of not going? of admitting that she did not dare to leave? But then, why had she led me to believe so certainly that she would be here?”

The knot under my stomach became one of anger as I dialled her home and, in a clipped, stern voice, demanded to know why she had put me through this ordeal. Determined to con-

front her at home, to have her work through the fears of the crowds, to assist if possible in fighting off whatever demons seemed to trigger her anxiety attacks, I walked the eight blocks to her house.

The hospital was a logical shortcut and, as my footsteps echoed on its barren corridors, I was struck with the institutional hostility of the architecture. The gleaming exposed pipe and duct work and the glass elevators did not invite one to pause in comfort for a while.

“Maybe she stopped in the cafeteria for one of its familiar coffees.”

I scanned the empty tables but she was not there either.

The apartment lobby was empty when I arrived and no one entered or left the building as I pressed her door release bell. On the third bell press, it seemed as if there was a slight door opening noise but I had imagined it and the doors remained closed. After two more attempts I gave up and walked back slowly to the Jubilee. This time as I entered the hospital I chose the ambulatory care route.

“Who knows. Maybe she panicked and went to the walk-in clinic here.”

But the only people I saw at Emergency were a couple of women smoking on the bench outside, one of them sporting a savage bruise and bloodied forehead while puffing away on her cigarette.

The Jubilee was very quiet as I walked once more across the main lobby, past the telephone booths, the lounges, the ticket counter. The bartenders were preparing for the intermission but I did not have the heart to search any longer and left. At home I once

again called her answering machine and expressed my frustration. It was 9:30.

At 10:20 she called and there was an awkward moment of silence before she asked what had happened. There were no lobby noises in the background of her talk and I knew that she had waited by the phone at home to call, calculating a 10 p.m. end of concert and then calling me as if she just returned from Procol Harum. But I knew that she had not been there. Hadn't I checked every nook and cranny of that building in vain?

What hurt and angered me was that she would not admit to defeat, that she could not be honest and say: “I wanted to, I really wanted to, but when the moment to leave home approached, I lost courage. I hope you'll understand and forgive me.” Our conversation was curt and cold, and I slept fitfully that night.

The next morning she called again and, during her torrent of tears and protests, her descriptions and recall of events, the truth finally broke free. She had been at the Jubilee and it had been my own neurosis and anxieties that had triggered my bizarre searching behaviour. When people agree to meet in the main lobby, they wait to meet, they do not search to meet.

“Why had I searched so crazily, so stupidly, so illogically?” In the next few sleepless nights, glimmers of self-awareness dawned with the breaking dawn and I could only whisper, “*Déjà Vu*.”

I have a fear of being lost and alone, of losing my way in strange cities and along unknown pathways. Unfortunately, I have a simultaneous need to be strong and self-reliant, to tell myself that I can do it and will do it if

I only work hard enough. Thus I frequently take the wrong turn on the freeway and travel for miles before admitting that I am disoriented. I use verbal cues to keep myself on track when I drive alone to find an address and, as I search, every familiar building suddenly is cast in a strange light of not being the building I have circled three times. I shrug it off as a deficit in spatial perception, but it is more than that, and in the early dawn I know it is "the maze."

When I lived in Europe as a child, the schoolyear highlight was the end-of-the-year trip. On one of those trips, after gorging on the luxury of grapes in abundance on a jostling school bus, we emerged to enter an amusement park. There were swings and teeter totters, climbing ropes, and pyramids of log jams. And there was a maze. It had high bushes that lined the paths you entered and then surrounded you as you took one dead-end turn after another to locate the exit. I remember wanting to push through the bushes when there seemed to be no other way to exit, but there was barbed wire in the bushes that prevented such shortcuts. The cries of "here it is!" were heard increasingly more faintly as I became more and more disoriented. My grape-filled stomach began to squeeze me in its grip, and knots of fear saw me trapped in there with the school bus leaving. I was so small, who would miss me? In the distance I saw my older sisters waving to me from a white swing bridge,

laughing at their own pleasures while I was miserable. How I eventually found the exit is no longer clear in my memory but the experience has left its mark.

The night thoughts also trigger "the bag." We were three girls delivering mission brochures for the church in the dark of the evening. My task was to guard the bag of supplies as my sisters ran up and down the stairways of the Rotterdam homes to stuff the hand-held fliers in the mailslots. I was fascinated by the street lights, the fresh wet of the pavement, the sound of my sisters running up and down, the click of the dropped mailslots, the idea of being "grown up" enough to be out so late as a six-year-old. Suddenly I realized that the bag I had been guarding was gone and far ahead of me was a man walking quickly, carrying it away from my care. Terror seized me but I ran as fast as I could and hollered, "Hey, that's my bag!" But he continued to walk and I reached to grab his arm when I realized it was my father, laughing at his daydreaming daughter who had lost sight of her task. He had intended to tease but the fears of waiting and dreaming have remained with me.

The birds are chirping and soon the children will wake. Whether there will be more of these nighttime messages I do not know. All I know at this point is that I need to ask my friend for her forgiveness.