Animals

by Jaime Karnes

I had twenty-three new problems that week. I knew because I'd stayed awake the night before recording them on strips of colored construction paper. Yellow, for the most serious problems; red for problems similar to my previous problems; orange for problems most likely to become yellow by the end of the week; and green, for problems which were clearly the result of my therapy.

I folded my problems into pretty paper animals to keep me company. I set them on the Formica dinette set. I jammed some into cracks so they'd stand up straight: organized warfare. I imagined a young boy positioning his GI Joe's, except that my soldiers were giraffes, toads, five monkeys, three elephants, and a duckbilled platypus that looked more like a sea lion.

The monkeys were winning, I thought. I situated them in the rear and let the elephants storm the front lines. Platypus I placed in the very back beneath an upside down teacup. They're coming for you, I told him. The enemy will kill your comrades before attacking you. This will take a while. I lifted the cup and slid a saucer beneath to cut off his oxygen, to weaken him before the onslaught. This is going to hurt, I said.

I collected my problems that afternoon and carried them to therapy in a glass cookie jar that my ex-lover gave me.

I've seen all kinds of therapists. Old men and young women, black grad students and a Hasidic Rabbi who I think practiced illegally, and yet only one remains vivid in my memory. She was everything you'd expect and need from a friend you pay for: kind, patient, attentive.

My ex-lover? I don't know why I told that lie. I bought the cookie jar at a thrift store in Greenpoint. I do that often—buy old things and tell people they mean a lot to me. Like the brooch I'm wearing, lovebirds kissing, their tiny white plumes stretch across my shoulder blade; I say, this was my great grandmother's; it's worth more than your life.

I paid four dollars for it on the Lower East Side twelve years ago. It has a fake patina that I scratch with my nail each year for effect.

"Here they are." I hold the jar close to Therapist's face.

"Tell me how you feel today, Claire?"

She asked this each week and I always felt the same, but my answers were deliberate and rehearsed because I wanted her to sense she was helping me. Sometimes I told her I felt light and bouncy with a side of steaming guilt. I added the guilt so as to lend our sessions purpose. If I was too unencumbered, too breezy, I feared the entire relationship would backfire. She might hand me a gold trimmed piece of paper, my name in fancy script, congratulating me on graduating from my crisis.

Though I knew people never graduated from therapy, I feared the day would come when she wouldn't want to talk with me anymore, no matter how much I paid. So I told Therapist I was okay but not okay enough, like sex that's interrupted. My life was like that. Except that it was nothing like that, because interrupted sex implies something that feels good until it ends, abruptly. I waited for the feel good to start. Waited for it impatiently, like one waits for an express train. The week before, I waited for it, the train that is, on my way to a session. The moment I realized the train was, in fact, coming, I had an urge to shove the woman next to me onto the tracks. I pictured her lying on her back, mouth gaped open, runs in her pantyhose, rats licking her teeth. I told Therapist about my urge and she said it was okay to think other people have it better than us. She said it's very natural. She said we all do it.

"Did you meet anyone interesting this week?" Therapist asked, reminding me of my assignment.

I shook my head, not wanting to tell her about Ruthanne. Not wanting to admit that a woman like Ruthanne was out there in the world, in Manhattan, lurking around us. I wanted to talk about Therapist's son. I wanted finally to admit that I knew all the details of his death, that I was ready, after the last six months, to take his

place at her dinner table. I was ready to be the best daughter ever, if she'd have me.

“If you aren't willing to cooperate during these sessions I can't help you.”

Not willing to cooperate? Couldn't she see I'd labored over the problems, that I'd developed them with intent and gusto? They were for her. I said, “I really love your necklace, where did you get it?”

“You really must try to work out your fear of people.”

She was right, and her big brown eyes, set close together, stared at me from above her nose. A nose that looked nothing like mine, but could, I thought, with the right makeup.

Make-up is magic. Make-up can paint smiles from lips, blush on excitement, it can add levity to an otherwise heavy day. It can erase our secret selves and the lines we inherit and make us look like more interesting people.

“I met a woman,” I told Therapist.

“Good. And what was this woman like?”

I reached into the jar and pulled out the orange elephant.

“Why not the larger one? That red thing there.” Therapist pointed at the jar.

“No, not that one, not now.” Then I had another urge. Not to hurt Therapist or anything. I never wanted to hurt her, but I did want to leave. I suspected she wasn't going to like what she was about to hear and if she didn't, she'd never tell me everything would be all right while massaging my hand. She'd never pay for a cab and sit in Washington Square with me, never admire my black umbrella when it rained, and I'd never admire the way she tapped the toes of her patent leather flats in puddles on the sidewalk. We'd never get there if I was this candid.

Therapist leaned over, her shoulders hunched, elbows in her lap like she had to strain to hear me, like it was all up to me, like I had the power. That was, of course, ridiculous, because I didn't have power. I've never had power. I'm not that girl. I hope you don't think I'm that hungry girl who will take everything from you the first

night. I take slowly. Little bits here and there. Usually while giving, so it doesn't feel like any of the other person is being stripped away. People do that to one another; it's survival. If we give and don't take, then we end up alone, standing on a platform with someone waiting to push us onto the tracks.

I unfold the paper elephant. “I don't want this problem to interfere with our friendship.”

“Would you like to read it to me?”

“I probably should as it's written microscopically.”

Problem #14. On Monday I met a woman named Ruthanne, who claims she's been sharing my brain. She said we've had the same brain for some time now. I wasn't anticipating our meeting, so I didn't know what to say.

“What did you say to her?”

“Complimented her hat.”

“That's very good. Go on.”

“I complimented her hat and she informed me it was a family heirloom.”

“And then?”

“I told the woman I thought family heirlooms were good and she agreed, citing my mother's ring as example.”

“And?”

“And I wasn't wearing my mother's ring.”

Therapist took a lot of notes in her leather folio, on a pad of yellow paper. I imagined her drawing pictures of me, and beneath my name, Claire Wheeler, she'd write: Lonely, Delusional, Nice Brooch. I wondered if she even listened to me. I decided she was to the top with grief, so much so that grief leaked from her pores, from her nose; she sneezed it into hankies and left them in trash bins everywhere around the city. I imagined a body so overcome as hers would find it hard to pay close attention in situations like these. I continued talking as if she weren't listening.

“The woman insisted I wear the ring to show my family loyalty, which is when I politely excused myself, because mom is dead and

how can one show loyalty to a family she doesn't have.”

“Do you want to talk about your mother today?”

“No.”

“Do you want to talk about the ring you have on, dear?”

I liked when she called me dear. I wished she would say, my dear.

The ring, gaudy, over-sized, with gold inlay had a single disc of stained glass. I think my mother bought it in Chinatown. Cheap as everything else I owned. My mother was a knockoff; I inherited her plainness and her flat chest. Only my hair is not as dull as I remember hers being. Before it fell out. Before she lay in a bed at St. Vincent's, her baldness concealed with scarves from Canal Street, complaining they itched. Saying they were cheap.

I slipped the ring from my finger into my handbag. I didn't want any reminders that I used to be someone else's daughter. I wanted Therapist to see me as virginal, unaffected, not ruined by one woman already. She needed to focus on how available I was.

Therapist sat silent save the faint scratching of her doodles. She said silence is good and shouldn't be feared. I wrung my hands in my lap until she finally spoke.

“Clearly you've imagined this woman as means to finding a precious family heirloom.”

I hadn't, but I didn't want to have a mother-daughter spat before she'd even agreed to the arrangement.

“What else happened this week?”

“Nothing.”

“Something good must've happened?”

I didn't want to admit to finally visiting my mother's grave. I imagined Therapist's son lay beside my mother, even though my mother is buried in Jersey and wasn't a Jew. I wondered if they were watching us, cheering us on, hoping we could love one another without scavenging.

Therapist gave me her hopeful eyes, the eyes of a mother with a son at home playing video games, not of a mother with a son buried in Chatham Square.

My mother never looked at me with hopeful eyes. For three

months I left work at 2pm, caught the M7 to St. Vincent's and sat with her, waiting for a nurse or a doctor to relieve us from one another. “I like your lipstick,” she'd say. “But your skirt is too high-waisted.” Or, “Let me see your shoes.” And then, “Jesus and Mary, they are so dowdy, so prehistoric.”

I went to see my mother everyday until she died. We had nothing in common, but I knew that no one else would ever notice my shoes.

Therapist always checked her watch in the first fifteen minutes of session. I hated when she did this but understood that she was a busy woman. I wished it were Sunday, a day when our time could be measured between meals and laughs instead of minutes in one hour. I should've asked her right then if she'd even wanted a daughter.

“How about you read another issue, Claire.”

I thought talking about Lenny would make her see I was desirable, at least to someone.

Problem # 17 Lenny came over to my apartment. He said he was lonely, missed my mother and that seeing me makes him feel better. We talked for a stitch and then had sex on the kitchen floor. Afterwards I made him egg whites and corned beef hash while he read me the subway schedule in a British accent.

“This is the fifth time you've let him have you like that on the floor and then fed him.”

“Third time,” I said, quietly. “And I don't always feed him.”

“You must love him. Why would a woman lay on her back on cold linoleum for a man whom she does not love with all of her heart?”

“Wood, I have wood floors.”

Therapist looked down at her notebook.

“He'll make an honest woman out of me,” I said. “He'll provide for me and buy me perfume on holidays.”

“Are you sure?”

I tried to remember Lenny buying mother something, anything, but couldn't. They were together only two years. But I said, “Yes, most definitely.” I wanted to paint Lenny as a kind and giving man.

“He would buy me cashmere if it were cashmere I wanted.”

Therapist smiled and gave me a look that suggested I had fancy taste.

“It's just an example.” I stretched the polyester of my skirt to cover the sides of my chair, hoping that when not bunched the fabric resembled anything but polyester.

“Well, okay then. Perhaps he's not a bad guy. Does he want to be with you more than just occasionally?”

“No, I don't think so.”

“Do you want it to be more than just occasionally?”

“No, I don't think so.”

“What do you want?”

I wanted her. I wanted her to invite me to sleep at her home, in a spare bedroom with a queen sized bed covered in peach sheets with white polka dots and a glorious duvet made of old lace sewn together like patches. I wanted that. In order to get that I thought she needed to see me as sought-after.

“I want to be a daughter again,” I told her. “I want a second chance.”

Therapist wrapped her fingers on the silver teardrop pendant hanging from the gold chain around her neck.

I looked at my jar of problems, waiting for her to say something. Therapist probably thought that if she had a daughter, her daughter would never be so desperate.

I blurted, “Lenny says that I don't look like my mother, but we taste alike. I don't like it when he talks like that. I tell him friends shouldn't talk like that.”

“But you aren't friends, you're lovers.”

“Right,” I said. “That's right, we're lovers. That's what I meant.”

I felt like it was time. I felt like if I didn't do it right then, my head would go spinning from my shoulders. “Did your son have a girlfriend?” Though I knew her son was seven and if he'd had a little friend, surely it wasn't a girlfriend, I asked anyway.

“Why do you want to talk about my son?”

“He's in heaven, right?” I wondered if Jews even went to heaven.

They must; Jesus was a Jew. I needed to get out of that office.

Therapist looked surprised that I knew about her son. He'd been dead nearly a decade. She must've felt like her patients gossiped about her behind her back, like we formed a club or knitting circle or patient's guild. Like we took up collections around the Village and saved our pennies and nickels until we had enough money to sit on a stoop with coffee and chit-chat about Therapist.

“Why do you want to talk about my son?”

I grabbed the sea lion slash platypus and read fast, blending my words together like an excited toddler.

Problem #3 I researched Therapist at New York Public Library. I read about how her son died. I have decided I want to be Therapist's daughter. We both deserve second chances.

Therapist didn't move at first, except to reach for her pendant. I watched her in silence. She pulled a cardigan from the back of her chair, buttoning the center two buttons, unbuttoning them, re-buttoning them. She adjusted the collar of her ochre blouse, and rubbed her hands in quick succession over her upper arms.

“What does green mean?” Her voice hardened. “Why is that issue green?”

“No reason.”

“You're lying.”

Therapist stood. Her second story office with its massive windows made me feel as if we were in a tree house.

“Not nice out there today,” I said. “Unusual for July, don't you think?”

“Why is it green, Claire?”

“It's about you.” Us.

“Me?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Bringing my son into this is not going to help me help you.”

I'd wanted to say, this is not about your son. This is about you and me. I knew then that talking about her loss had been the wrong way to approach it. I cursed the platypus and shred his little mass

between my fingers.

“This is inappropriate, this talking about my son.”

I felt I had the right. I'd planned to talk about it for weeks. What did she mean I had no right?

“We both deserve a second chance.” I said it, and then imagined Therapist helping me up from my chair, holding me close.

“We're not friends,” she said. “I can't be your mother, either. Do you understand?”

I did, but I didn't want her to know she'd been so clear and persuasive, so I shook my head. This was not unfolding as I'd planned.

“When did you develop these feelings?”

I couldn't answer that either. I didn't know.

“I'm sorry I didn't see this coming for you.” She pressed a closed fist and then her forehead to the windowpane, “I'm struggling with my own loss.”

“You didn't know.”

“Today's session should be our last. Do you understand why?”

I'd made her feel like a bad Therapist, as if this was her fault, and it wasn't her fault. She was the only part of my life I hadn't maimed.

She returned to her chair, heavy. “Everyone deserves a second chance, Claire. I wish that for you.”

Good feelings happen slowly for me. Unlike bad feelings, which seem to short circuit at the worst possible times, like when I'm standing on a train platform, or ordering a cheese croissant in Park Slope, surrounded by strollers and red-headed children. Gingers, my mother called them. If the good feelings start, I suppress them. I take baths to drown them, sink them, stick them to the soap scum and little hairs on the side of the tub after I shave. I suffocate them until they come back rounder and full of breath. Sometimes I pretend to put them in the toaster with an English muffin and walk away until the smoke detector goes off, until the burnt bread and good feelings can't be separated from the black char.

“Time's up?” I asked.

“It is.” She didn't check her watch. “I'd be glad to refer you to another doctor.”

What seems monumental often is not—like turning sixteen, or losing your virginity, like swimming naked in a lake beneath a sky ablaze in lightening, or being fired from your first job. While the small moments, the insignificant details in life, become the constant in which everything vacillates, trying to feel as equal, as important. And no matter how many pictures you take, how many albums you collect over the years, the big things never count. We laugh on our wedding day because suddenly it's as if nothing has ever seemed so funny or absurd, and we cry on our birthdays because we think they are supposed to mean something more. When they don't, we feel bad for ourselves.

The following week I returned to my mother's grave. I confessed everything. I said, “You left a terrible legacy. You left me like this. And I am here to tell you that I'll never do what you've done.” I poured my pretty paper animals in a potted plant beside her marker. I dumped them on her, left them to decay with her. I went to Therapist's clinic light and bouncy, but Therapist wouldn't see me. Her receptionist at the clinic gave me an envelope. “Your reference.”

A small package accompanied the letter—the size of one of those cards you stick in flowers you send people who aren't important enough for more than a few words—a bit of tissue paper wrapped around a silver tear drop pendant on a gold chain. I recognized it immediately. The note said: To second chances.

I've never told anyone about the necklace or about Therapist. I've worn it and seen other shrinks. I've confessed many problems including my husband's infidelity, my daughter's autism, my own inadequacies at parenting. I've admitted that sometimes when I'm making love to my husband I picture the woman who bags my groceries at Pathmark. I admit to hiding food beneath my bed to eat

late at night; sometimes after I prepare dinner, the idea of eating with my family makes me ill. My husband chews with his mouth open and our kids do the same. I want a breast enhancement; I talk about that. I steal money my husband gives to the kids; I steal fifty dollars a week from our grocery allowance. I feed the kids generic cereal, and tell my husband it's organic. Some lies can't be helped.

This morning, I was at the drycleaner picking up my husband's shirts. A garish woman in line talked on her cell phone. Her daughter had been shoved from a platform on some stop off the L train. She was beside herself in a way that made me uncomfortable, but also in a way that made me question her decision to stay in line. Certainly her daughter wasn't dead. She poured on the tears for her audience, and eventually the conversation led to a discussion of who was best fit to retrieve her daughter from the hospital and drive her home. When her conversation was over, I tapped her shoulder.

“Is your daughter seeing anyone?” I asked.

“Oh, yes. Yes, she is seeing a man from upstate.”

“No, a therapist. Is she seeing a therapist?”

“Well,” the woman hesitated, “I don't know. Why do you ask?”

“No reason.” I gripped my necklace.

I didn't have the right to tell the woman that her daughter probably wasn't pushed from the platform. I didn't have the right to tell her that most of us are ready to jump. That that's what we want to do when no one is looking.