

This short story was originally published in Harper's Magazine. It was later anthologized in a book called *On the Couch: Great American Stories About Therapy* (Atlantic Monthly Press), edited by Erica Kates. It was read by Vivian Pickles as part of NPR's "Selected Shorts" series.

The Whole Truth

She told her psychiatrist she was happily married and had taken a lover only because she was afraid of being too close to her husband, whom she'd wed six years earlier. If she'd been more truthful, she'd have confessed that she'd begun her affair with the dentist, whose office was in the same medical building as her own, because she was bored with her husband, and that fear of intimacy with her lover had driven her to sleep with the carpenter who'd come to work on the front steps of the house late in the summer. But she hadn't told her psychiatrist about the carpenter at all, because her indiscretion with him struck her as slightly sordid, and her psychiatrist was a gentle, bald man who sucked on sucked on sour balls and nodded eagerly as she spoke and reminded her too much of her father. She thought he might be upset to hear she'd fallen into bed with a relative stranger. Mentioning her ongoing affair with the dentist was surely enough. Besides, the steps were long finished, and she was quite certain she'd never see the carpenter again, even though, in truth, she still thought of him often.

To compensate for her omissions, she transposed her feelings as she spoke. Thus, whenever she wished to talk about her fear of getting too close to her lover, she pretended she was talking about her husband. And when she talked about the sexual excitement of her affair with the dentist, she was really describing her fantasies about the carpenter. If she wanted to discuss the exasperating boredom of her marriage, she talked about a brief, boring first marriage, which she'd invented during her second week of analysis. It wasn't

hard to keep track once she had it all down. And, she assured herself, the essence of what she was saying was true; she simply toyed with the names. As long as she was able to keep it all straight in her mind, her analysis would have some value.

It was her husband, who was kind and bald and reminded her a little of her father—and now her psychiatrist—who'd first suggested she seek treatment. She'd confessed to him that she was unhappy, although she'd told him it was because, after all the years of school and training, she was bored with dentistry. She'd hinted, too, but only in the most gentle way, that she was having doubts about their marriage, which, in fact, she was not. She knew that she was bored and that the marriage was simply a matter of convenience for her and dependency for her husband. What she was having doubts about was her affair. When her husband asked her, as he did from time to time, what she'd told her psychiatrist about their relationship, she'd report some of the things she'd actually said about him, even though they were of course things he really felt about her lover.

Despite what she's told her husband, she enjoyed her profession and, after four years, had established a successful practice. She and her husband lived in a university town, and many of her patients were young professionals and academic wives, the kinds of people who usually didn't need much major dental work but who came dutifully three times a year for cleaning and a checkup. To please them, she'd decorated her waiting room with old black and white photographs she'd bought at antique stores and easy chairs draped with cloth imported from India. The décor had first struck her as homey, if a bit cluttered. Now, however, her waiting room had begun to look to her like a psychiatrist's

office. She avoided subscribing to predictable dentist-office publications and instead kept recent copies of literary journals on the table by the door. She'd bought a narrow pine bookcase in which she kept story collections by contemporary writers whom she admired, even though she didn't much care for short stories.

Most of her patients called her by her first name, and many felt to her like casual friends. A number of women always asked her about her husband, and as she worked on their teeth she'd talk about him amiably, describing a man made up of equal parts of her spouse, her love, and her fantasies about the carpenter.

Her mother lived in Kentucky and was proud of her achievements. The only regret her mother ever expressed was that her husband had not lived to see their daughter graduate from dental school. She was close to her mother, and they talked on the phone once a week for at least an hour. Wanting desperately to tell her about her psychiatrist, but not wanting to alarm her, she told her mother that her husband, who was twelve years older than she was, had started seeing a therapist three times a week. Therapist sounded more benign than psychiatrist. She told her mother her husband was having a mid-life career crisis. Feeling daring, she also hinted at suspicions that he was having an affair. Her mother listened sympathetically and suggested that perhaps she and her husband should go to Bermuda together for a week and try to work things out. She reminded her mother that her husband's therapy appointments made such a vacation impossible. After she'd hung up, she went to her husband and told him she thought he should take a vacation, even though she wouldn't be able to go along.

Her lover was also married. He was severe and serious and driven by nervous intensity. He bit his fingernails and sometimes, after they'd made love, would take her in his arms and weep. He would divorce his wife if she would divorce her husband. The two of them would go off together, set up a practice in a different city, and start life all over. She explained to him that she was tempted, but could not make any moves until she had resolved some things in analysis. When her lover asked her if she was telling her psychiatrist how much they loved each other and the passionate nature of their sexual relationship, she told him that she was, even though when she described to her psychiatrist her longing for the dentist, she was thinking of the carpenter. And when she told her psychiatrist about her desire to leave her husband, she was really describing her desire to break off her affair with the dentist.

She feared that if she confessed to her psychiatrist that she'd been unable to tell her mother about him, his feelings would be hurt, and he would think she was resisting treatment. So instead she told him that she'd told her mother, and that her mother had been understanding and helpful. While she was on the subject, she told her psychiatrist that it was her mother who'd suggested her husband take a week in Bermuda on his own. She didn't want to sound manipulative by admitting that she'd suggested it to her husband herself, and her mother had, after all, been the one to bring up the subject of a vacation.

In the middle of November, her husband noticed that the floor of the porch on the back of the house was beginning to rot, and he called the carpenter. She told her this one night over dinner, and she felt her heart race and sink and race and sink in a peculiar way,

almost as if she were running a fever. He told her that the carpenter would begin work in the middle of the next week, the very Wednesday, in fact, he was leaving for Bermuda. He apologized that he would not be there to oversee the job. She told him that the carpenter had impressed her as reliable and would probably need very little supervision, and she finished her dinner hastily.

The Monday before her husband left on his trip, she decided to test the waters. She told her psychiatrist that a young man would be working on their house that week, that she had met him when he'd come to estimate the cost of the job, and that she had found him attractive. She told him he was a craftsman who painted walls with sponges so the finished surface looked like fine wallpaper. This skill, she felt, made him sound as sensitive and refined as she was certain he really must be. Her psychiatrist raised one eyebrow inquisitively, a gesture that she took as a sign of disapproval. So she dropped the subject of the carpenter quickly, and told him, as if confessing it, that she was looking forward to her husband's departure so that she could spend more time with her lover, the dentist.

She canceled her appointments for Wednesday, drove her husband to the airport, and sped home in a state of confused anticipation. It was an oddly warm day, nearly eighty, and the November sky was blank and murky in the Indian-summer heat. She waited for the carpenter on the front steps of the house, dressed in a long skirt made of thin cotton and a baggy blouse, trying to read a collection of stories recommended to her by a patient.

When he finally arrived, she felt embarrassed, certain that he could read her anxiety and its source on her brow. She was only somewhat relieved to notice that he, too, seemed uncomfortable.

She stayed in the house all day, cleaning and arranging drawers and cautiously looking out the kitchen window to the porch where the carpenter was working. It wasn't until late in the afternoon, when he was sweeping up for the day, that she asked him inside and offered him a drink.

She called her receptionist the next morning and canceled her patients for rest of the week. Then she called her lover and told him she'd decided to take advantage of her husband's absence by visiting her mother in Kentucky for a few days. She left a message on her psychiatrist's answering machine, explaining that she'd decided to go to Bermuda with her husband after all and would therefore miss her next two appointments.

The carpenter was five years younger than she was, dark-eyed and appealingly stocky. He wore blue jeans and a red T-shirt. He worked diligently on the porch for the next two days. Now and again he'd enter the house, and kiss her teasingly and tell her she was beautiful. When he finished work for the afternoon, he'd come inside, sweaty and exhausted, and they'd make love, though never, he insisted, in the bed she shared with her husband.

On Saturday night she prepared him an enormous, complicated dinner. After the meal, they lay together on the sofa in the living room with the curtains drawn and a light sheet pulled over their bodies. There had been a rainstorm that afternoon, and the weather had turned seasonably cool, though the rooms of the house were still warm. He

told her he loved her, and she kissed him thankfully, even though she wasn't young or sentimental enough to believe he meant it.

He told her he was moving to Texas for the winter. He had friends there who had offered him a job for a few months; he'd put his books and his furniture into storage and drive south. He didn't really know how long he'd stay away. She was struck all at once by how wonderfully, simple it sounded, by how unentangled and uncomplicated his life was, compared with her own. It seemed pure, clean, and enviable. Jokingly, he asked her if she'd like to go with him. She told him she would in a soft high, voice. She buried her face in his broad chest and began to laugh at the idea. Her laughter fed on itself until she lost control completely and discovered that she was weeping.

She rarely cried. She had cried only once in front of her psychiatrist. In response to something she'd said, he had asked her if she was happy, and, unaccountably, she had burst into tears.

Now she curled her body against the comfortable flesh of the carpenter's stomach and, as he stroked her hair, told him, in simple, flat sentences, the truth about her husband and her lover and her mother and her psychiatrist and the tangle of lies and the elaborate fabrications she had told each of them. She wept on and off as she spoke. Sometimes, she would be struck by the awful humor of what she was saying, and she would start to laugh. When she finished, she looked at him and saw on his face a puzzled expression, as if he hadn't quite followed her story.

But perhaps it didn't matter whether he understood or not. It was enough that she had told him. She asked him to stay the night with her. He held her closely, kissed the top of her head tenderly, and told her he couldn't.

On Monday, a different carpenter arrived at the door to finish the job. His partner, he explained, had had to leave town for a few days. She nodded and showed him to the porch, scorched by the obvious lie.

Her husband returned on Wednesday evening and she picked him up at the airport. His skin was darker, and his bald head was shining, and he looked relaxed, as if he'd eaten and slept well. He told her about an old woman who'd sat next to him on the return flight, clicking rosary beads the whole way. He asked her if she had missed him, and she said she had and told him that the work on the porch was finished.

She prepared chicken and rice and frozen peas, and they ate in silence.

On Thursday she decided that her analysis was getting her nowhere, largely because she had told so many lies. But she couldn't disappoint the bald, kind man with the sour balls who reminded her so much of her husband and her father by confessing that all of the work they'd done together over the past several months had been based on a network of half-truths. So she told him her husband had been transferred to Texas and that she was moving with him. She did love her husband, and the change of scene would be good for them: the trip to Bermuda alone had done wonders. They were moving next month, so she would have to leave treatment immediately. There was much organizing and packing she had to do.

She saw no point in telling her husband or her lover that she had stopped seeing her psychiatrist, since she certainly would not care to tell them the reasons why. And anyway, she had already made an appointment with a new doctor. It couldn't matter to them what her psychiatrist's name was, which, from their vantage point, would be the only visible change.

Her new psychiatrist was a towering man with bright eyes and a slight accent she couldn't place. He wasn't as kindly looking as her old psychiatrist, and she felt certain she would be able to tell him honestly about her husband and her lover and even the carpenter.

He asked her, as soon as she sat in the chair across from her, why she'd decided to terminate with her previous doctor. This question stunned her into silence, and she averted her eyes. If she told him the truth about that, he would probably begin to doubt everything else she told him, all of which, she had promised herself, would be true. So she told him instead that her old psychiatrist was quite old indeed, and that he had consistently confused the people she talked about, mistaking her lover for her husband, her husband for her father, and so on, until she herself had been confused. She hadn't seen the point in going on with him, much as she had liked him.

Her new psychiatrist listened sympathetically, nodded, and settled into his chair. She felt that he approved of her reasons for leaving her old psychiatrist, and reassured, she began to tell him the rest.