

The Last Session

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Sophie is still struggling to breathe after a therapy session that wasn't a therapy session. An outpouring, more than two hours long, it had been impossible to write everything down. She's shattered.

The first time she sees a client Sophie usually takes as many notes as she can. She draws family trees, writes down mother's tirades against their daughters, tries to understand words smothered in sobs. Clients will sometimes take mile-long detours to avoid the source of their pain, or an entire dream life will come out in a gush in the last five minutes. Some people have already gazed into their own souls for years and have seen things for what they are. They know what torments them, they know how they would have liked things to be different and they want to tell this to a stranger. Others have no idea and come to empty the dustbins of their mind. People are extraordinary creatures, sometimes there's neither head nor tail to be made of things and still they want to try to give it a go, to disentangle things together, climb out of the confusion together.

The client doesn't have to click with her as a therapist. A therapist often does very little aside from just sit there and listen. There are clients who start off with denials: 'I didn't shed a single tear when my Marcel died,' one says, 'that poor creature was old and worn out,' before beginning to cry uncontrollably. Sophie makes herself as small as possible, disappearing to make space for the pain of a middle-aged man mourning the loss of his Pekinese and the lack of love during his childhood. It's good when they momentarily forget that she's there. Marcel the little dog is in the room and takes up all the space. A client will hear the clatter of glass in the bottle bank outside and suddenly realise that time is passing and there's still so much, so impossibly much, they want to leave behind in these fifty minutes – an entire life. The sound of breaking glass always wakes them up, the client and her.

At parties people ask for her advice on their personal dilemmas. 'How could I just look on while that bastard ruined my daughter's life?' they'll say, inching a little closer. 'I told her I never want to see her with him again.' Or they'll ply her for juicy stories from her practice. Sophie waves this off, out of respect for her clients. She's not interested in the stories but in the role she can play, the ways she can help.

Clients have accused her on occasion of not doing her job. Like the widow who seemed to be placing her dead husband on a pedestal. Sophie told her as much. After discovering that her late husband had been addicted to anonymous sex in car parks, she'd returned for a session. She defended him and became angry with Sophie. But even when she stopped turning up, the client carried on paying each week. The therapist was the wrongdoer, not her deceased husband. Anything in her life

that didn't go the way she wanted, she could blame on her therapist. Sophie fulfilled an important role, that of a whipping boy.

Sophie has always valued possessions and money. The day of her eighteenth birthday she asked for the inheritance she was due. She invoices the therapy sessions without fail, seeing the payments as compensation for emotional damage, no cynicism intended. People often come to her with a sack load of pain. 'Leave it here with me,' she'll say. 'I can bear it.' They open the sack together for an agreed fee, it's an honest transaction.

On the outside, this appears to be like any other day. The sun floods in through the high windows. It is a pleasant room. A cream-coloured wool rug from Hay, a reading lamp with a copper base, a couple of psychology handbooks on the vintage Tomado bookshelf. White walls. Some slight cracks if you take a good look. House plants attempting to flower. A clock with hands. In this room, time goes its own way, Sophie can only follow. Sometimes a fifty-minute session is over in a flash, sometimes she already feels wrung-out after just five minutes. It depends on the story.

She's always been good at listening in silence, her whole life long. She can disappear into the life of another person and hide away in a corner there. She had a lot of practice as a child. Her guardian angel looks on. She lets people talk, and some of them also mention their own guardian angel hovering in the background. For men it's often their mother.

Sophie crawls into stories, looks for connecting themes, and keeps an eye on the clock in the meantime. Fifty minutes later, she lands back in the room, makes the next appointment with the client, before suddenly remembering she'd promised to buy coffee beans or a gift for a dinner she and her husband are invited to that evening. Today everything has been different. After more than two hours, she stuttered something to her client and fled the room.

Kristien De Decker, seventy-five years old. That was how she began when the therapist, Sophie, asked her to introduce herself.

She's a perfectly ordinary woman, she wanted to emphasise that. In good health, that too. Not the best eyesight, and a dodgy hip, but she counts herself lucky when she compares herself to her peers. She has two grown-up children who are doing well. They're about the same age as the woman facing her. She doesn't dare look up. Come on, she's been practicing this. Carry on with your story.

Wouter is forty, he's an architect. Barbara is two years older, she has two kids and she's a Dutch teacher. Kristien has a faithful husband, Alex, and a cat, Ball o' Wool the Third. And still, she's here. Only Sophie can help her. She's been looking forward to the appointment the way you look forward to seeing the dentist when you have a toothache. She's been counting the days – that's a better way of expressing it. She's looking for deliverance. She has run through the whole story so often in her mind but she's never shared it with anybody. Silence bites back, she realises now.

Everyone sees a therapist these days. But, well not her. This is different.

She sees herself as a perfectly ordinary Belgian woman. She's repeating herself. Don't repeat yourself. It's the nerves.

Last week she went to the hairdressers'. Still getting used to her new bob haircut. For years she'd worn her hair in a bun on top of her head. She'd adopted the hairstyle as a teenager, it tallied with her own awkwardness, and later it was to draw attention away from her plump body. It had never been because people complimented her on it. She does her best to fit in. She was rarely noticed, unless it was because she'd done something clumsy. When her mother said, 'Don't touch the new curtains, I want them to last,' she became so nervous she tripped, grabbing the heavy fabric. The curtain pole tapped the top of her head like a magic wand and she passed out. Curtains broken and a

large bump. Own fault. That was a silly example, she says, but that's what keeps happening. She's been doing precisely the wrong thing her entire life.

Start at the beginning. But where is that? It's often hard to find the thread with a ball of wool. She knows, she keeps going off at a tangent. It's because of her nerves.

The woman talks fast but in a soft voice, as though she doesn't want to wake up a baby. That's how bashful she is. Exude calm. Nod at her. Sophie tried this already when she opened the front door to the woman and saw her on the doorstep, awkwardly clutching a cardboard tube under her arm. A small woman, neatly turned out. Older, early seventies, she'd written on the intake form. Her mother's generation. Women in their seventies rarely ask for her help. They're more likely to visit a specialist, or go to marriage counselling with their partner.

A friendly round face with a dyed brown bob, large eyes darting about. Sophie wanted to take the poster holder from her, help the woman over the doorstep and say she was welcome. But professionally she wasn't allowed to do this.

She led her to the consulting room and patted a cushion invitingly. The woman sank down onto the couch. Something soft to land on. Sophie sat down facing her, notebook on her lap. The woman was looking for support. She lay a plump hand on the tube on her lap. She began to apologise but still didn't look Sophie in the eye. She had a long explanation ready: she'd driven home again, worried she'd left on the gas. Sophie didn't respond to this, she was barely a minute late.

Kristien De Decker has often been told that she sidesteps issues. Her situation now? Her husband Alex is a patient man but he's had enough. He's given her an ultimatum. He can no longer cope. 'My nerves are giving out for the first time too,' he said, 'and so is our bank account.' He has moved into their flat in Calpe and Kristien has stayed on here alone. He doesn't know she's come to see Sophie. She's just going to pop the tube down on the floor now.

Kristien has been telling anyone who will listen for years that she can't let go of the house. Most of the neighbours have already downsized, or moved to their country houses, their seaside bungalows, or to comfortable apartments close to their grandchildren. Some of them to retirement homes. Kristien says firmly that she's staying put, she says the children grew up in that house, she spent the best years of her life there, the attic contains their memories in cardboard boxes, diaries filled with dreams and first times. She says she needs her turret room with her craft supplies, her weaving loom and the calligraphy pens she keeps in the drawers of her desk.

The veranda is being devoured by woodworm, tiles are falling from the roof. You can't take a single step without something crumbling or collapsing. Their savings are draining away on hopeless repairs. When she arrived home yesterday, water was dripping down the kitchen wall, a pipe had burst. She hasn't told Alex yet. She's been adamant with Alex that she won't move from the house that holds their history in its walls. She's really attached to it.

But. But that's not true. It's not about the house but something else.

There are secrets she'll take with her to her grave. Has Sophie experienced things like this in her work before? Kristien means it, she's remained silent for so long she's become fond of her secrets. They're obedient, they move along faithfully with her. They walk beside her, follow her everywhere. But she's sick of them.

Sophie has jotted down a couple of words. Pain radiates from her lower back. It might be period pain, but if so, her cycle's in a mess. She straightens her back and crosses her left leg over her right.

The woman opposite her changes position too. She rubs her soft small hands, her fingers seeking each other. Manicured hands with dark red nail polish. The nail polish is slightly chipped at the tips. Perhaps she washes the dishes by hand. Sophie's hands are dry, there's still a bit of chalk under her thumbnail.

Yesterday evening she went to the climbing gym. She needs to take some exercise after a day of consultations. She's not really suited to a sedentary profession. Her body needs to move or it starts to hurt. She went straight from work. Changing into a pair of shorts and a baggy t-shirt in the dressing room is what she needs to flip the switch. A difficult climbing route, the pink one that requires complete concentration, and the only problem on earth is under your arms and legs. She mis-reached for the highest grip yesterday and fell hard onto the mat. Perhaps that's why her lower back is hurting. Her coccyx. That pointless tail end. You only notice it when it troubles you.

Bzzz comes from behind Sophie, from her handbag. She's forgotten to put her telephone on flight mode. She always does that before a session. She wants to be there at least fifteen minutes before the client. This morning she only just managed it because of an accident in the road tunnel. She's almost certain it's a message from her partner, to check she forgot to post the letter. Yes, of course, she'll answer. It's their joke. She tends to forget minor chores. Later she will post the letter for her partner's niece who is at a school seaside camp. It's a card of a mermaid covered in sludge, in a pink envelope. There are hardly any postboxes left anymore. There's one two streets away.

She apologises and turns around and dives into her bag to turn off the phone. Focus. She needs to get the woman started. The gentle touch, give her space. That's how you get the furthest. There are no right questions, she just needs to find openings that the words can pour out through.

What she wants to achieve with the therapy? Hmm, Kristien doesn't have a goal in mind. Does she need one? She's trapped inside her mind, she's quick to get embarrassed. She's never been very adventurous. People say she's too accommodating, too self-effacing. That's the problem with women, she thinks sometimes: they're too proud, they don't ask for help, they handle things themselves and they don't go and compare problems, discovering that they have the same ones, until it's too late. Her daughter is better than her at that. Perhaps it's the women of her own generation. Or just herself.

Kristien finds it challenging to leave the house. For a quarter of a century she's been holding down the homefront. Sitting in her turret. The only thing she can do is stay in her neighbourhood, it's the only way she can find peace and quiet. A lot of people have told her to stand up for herself, Tove more so than anyone else.

Tove came into her life twenty-five years ago. She wants to talk about that. It's a lot. The transition from 1999 to 2000 was scary. All over the world people thought computers would get confused and go back in time, back to 1900, and lose all their data. At school the children had even been instructed by the weird physics teacher which formulas they could recite to the alien UFO soldiers who'd land in the playground. But on 1st January 2000, it wasn't all over for humankind. The computers hadn't turned against the earth-dwellers and they'd kept all their data, aliens hadn't landed and the planet hadn't turned to dust. The year two thousand was a promise, three shiny balls in a row so that it was possible to properly start over again.