“because a fire was in my head”

ELIZABETH TENER

ABSTRACT: This is a case study of a woman in midlife, trying to negotiate a transition from family attachment to sexual love and intimacy. The move was derailed earlier by traumatic adolescent losses, her denial of her lesbian identity, and the onset of bipolar disorder. By entering therapy, following her dreams and synchronous life events, and enduring another bipolar break, the woman was able to make the transition and become more completely herself.

KEY WORDS: lesbian; bipolar II; midlife transition; coming-out.

“I dreamed,” she said, the fifth or sixth time we met, “that you and I were walking together through fields of lavender. I have always wanted to plant lavender at Kerry...” My client was referring to her weekend cottage in the Massachusetts mountains. “I turned to you and gave you a small box lined in green velvet. Something very precious was inside, something small and golden, like a Christmas ornament. I asked you to hold it for me, to keep it safe, and not to tell anyone.”

My breath caught a moment. I was touched by how much trust this new client’s unconscious had in me already. In the course of our work together, I was to learn that most of Clare’s dreams would be crystalline, as this one was... clear and easy to interpret, multifaceted, feminine, poetic (many of them were linked to actual poems) and powerfully numinous. It has been said that the first dream a client shares in psychotherapy contains folded in its images the whole course of treatment. In this Advent dream, Clare gave me her self-to-be, hidden in a womb of velvet, infinitely precious, full of promise but not yet ready to be born. My own associations embroidered the dream: I saw the ornament as spherical, its golden surface etched and decorated, its hollow interior containing—what? I did not know yet that Clare’s true self contained two locked rooms, hardly even acknowledged, let alone explored. By the act of

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coming to therapy, Clare was giving herself a message—it was time to find the keys.

Clare came to work with me in the spring of 1999. She had just turned 50, a neat no-frills lady, slightly overweight, always wearing a flowery scent that filled the room when she arrived and lingered after she left. She told me she had recently grown anxious and afraid, because her cousin Ian was dying. Ian was 10 years older than Clare, and as a child, she worshipped him. They grew up to be the best of friends, in love with gardening and everything Irish, both choosing to teach in the same New York City public school. Ian had recently been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, the same fast-moving, deadly disease that had killed Clare’s father when she was a nineteen-year-old college student. Clare had memories of a sudden diagnosis, hospital corridors that smelled of death, her father in excruciating pain, and then an unfillable hole in her family and her heart. For this and for other reasons I was yet to discover, Clare’s emotional health began a slow, downward spiral over the next 17 years, which ended eventually in her hospitalization for a bipolar breakdown. This occurred in 1986, thirteen years before she and I first spoke. After her discharge and a brief follow-up period, Clare was quick to pack the frightening and humiliating experience away in the past. She was all better; she was fine. No more medications, psychiatrists, or therapy. But part of her was always watching, watching—tracking the rise and fall of her moods. Her cousin’s illness was triggering painful memories, and those old frightening feelings were looming. Although she was loath to ask for help, and chastised herself for needing it, she knew that it was the sensible thing to do. As she told me all this, I got the first look, but only through the keyhole, inside one of Claire’s locked rooms.

Several sessions later, she came in with something more on her mind. “It isn’t just that Ian’s sick. That isn’t all of it...” She sat, her eyes turned away from me, for a long time. I waited, knowing something was gathering inside her. She finally said she had always been attracted to women, and not men, but had never done anything about it. Nor had she even spoken about it to anyone before now. Recently, she had begun to long for a relationship...she had just turned 50 and knew that time was passing. On one hand, she wasn’t sure she wanted anyone in her life; she wasn’t sure she could bear day-in-day-out closeness. Feelings of merging unsettled her; she needed psychic and physical room to calm herself. On the other hand, she felt more and more desire to have a partner to focus on and to love. She said she was almost superstitiously afraid that now that she’d told me her sexual secret, everyone would know. And she was also afraid that I would leave or move away or make it impossible for her to continue. “Now you are the only one who knows this about me. What if you leave?”

As I sat listening to these moving revelations, I had a strange, inchoate feeling—almost a foreboding. Although I had no idea what form it would take, I felt that Clare was on the verge of a free-fall. She would crash...but the