

## FIFTY MINUTES

Once a week Kate sits in his small office, laying out stories spanning her thirty years. Loose pages of a book, confessional secrets for her pastoral counselor to untangle and make sense of, they tell of her father's angry outbursts and stony silences, her mother's icy glares and disapproving comments, her own struggle for self-esteem.

Week after week he listens as though no one existed but Kate, no one as interesting, as special. He helps her separate from her hurtful childhood, his eyes sparkling with warmth, sometimes even tearing up, depending on the story she's told. For those brief fifty minutes he's the father she never had, the mother she's dreamed of, the big brother she longs for. Her savior.

Like the George Eliot poem, she pours the words out, chaff and grain together, confident he will tell her how to navigate in a world that often overwhelms her. Each week, releasing the broken pieces of her life into his care, he tells her things no one has ever told her: that she's smart, talented, worthy, and most important, that she's special, a word she clings to like a life raft.

Nothing will ever separate us, he assures Kate, allaying her fear that the magic will go up in smoke, that he will drop out of her life, stop listening, leave her helpless and hopeless again. Massaging Bible verses to fit his purposes, he rewrites Romans 8, telling her that neither death nor life, angels nor demons...nor things present, nor things to come will separate them. Ever. He is, Kate is certain, a gift from God, this man of the cloth carrying her to safety with his

compassion and wisdom, rescuing her with his words, just like the Footprints in the Sand poem she loved as a teenager.

Gradually, his power creeps into every aspect of her life, like a plant sending out tendrils. Soon, she needs her fix like an alcoholic needs a drink. She writes him at home, little notes on index cards she presents to him at their next session, frantic attempts to maintain the connection. She calls him through his answering service for reassurances, a few words to tide her over till they meet again. She writes him poems. Dedicates a tree to him at the Botanical Gardens. Asks her parents to drive down his street one night, claiming she wants to see the stately homes in the area. Doesn't mention this is where her therapist lives. Doesn't dare. Therapy is for weaklings, not for her family members. But as they make their way down his street she cranes her neck to keep the house in sight, reminded of the song from "My Fair Lady —" "On The Street Where You Live" — for it *is* a comfort to know he's close by.

A turning point comes several years after beginning therapy; a chink appears in the armor after hundreds of fifty-minute sessions. After her devotion to him has firmly taken root. He casually mentions Pygmalion, comparing their relationship to the Greek myth. Not as well-read as he is — no Ivy League credentials for her— she doesn't want to look stupid by asking for details but vaguely remembers comparisons between Pygmalion and "My Fair Lady," her favorite musical inserting itself into her life again. Is she Eliza to his Henry Higgins, she wonders? Is he sculpting

her into something of his own design without her permission or awareness? It makes her feel uncomfortable, though she can't say why.

When her obsession is in-full-force, he begins to move the boundaries, crossing sacred lines that can never be uncrossed. Like a faithful disciple she follows him into unfamiliar, terrifying territory, becomes a citizen of a nether world where she barely recognizes herself. But how to deny this man who has given her so much, she reasons? He'd never hurt me, she believes. Over the course of two or three years, he transforms himself Houdini-style from father-figure to sexual predator, so subtly and slowly it's like water rising an inch at a time till suddenly she realizes she's drowning.

When it's too late to turn back the clock, remove his stench from her body, erase his fingerprints from her soul, he justifies his behavior by confessing to her — in a letter — that his actions were his due, that it had been his right, as he put it, to feast on the “cornucopia” of experiences other men were enjoying. Why not me, he asks rhetorically. Why not you? she wonders. And what was beautiful and life-saving becomes weaponized against her. But ever so slowly the truth eventually begins to seep into her consciousness. A tiny seed takes root, and she wakes up. Looks around. Breaks the spell. Does what she has to do. Seeks justice. Protects other women from a similar fate. Files complaints with his church and his counseling service. Testifies before the keepers of his credentials. Has him defrocked. Limps on in her scarred life.

But, still... Reflecting on it years later, she catches herself returning to the time before beautiful became hideous. The hours she sat in his office, childlike and adoring, trusting and nervous, grateful to be listened to, looked at, understood. The smell from his pipe, his professorial look with his shaggy dark hair, warm and sparkly eyes and wire rim glasses. His fuzzy sweaters and corduroy pants. His smile. His kind words. If only she could rewind their sessions, erase the ugly parts and go back to the beginning when those fifty minutes were magical... But she can't. Invoking Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, she realizes that what's done cannot be undone. Too late to restore her trust in anyone. Erase the guilt she feels. Recover from her loss of self-esteem. Too late to expunge memories that will forever darken thoughts of all those fifty minutes, not to mention all the minutes yet to come, the rest of her life.