

Picturing The Wreck

Dani Shapiro

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Psychoanalysis invades our personal intimacy, it uncovers forgotten thoughts, peeks at shaming images and searches out repressed feelings. Therapy not only frees us, it can anger us as well. The intimacy of psychoanalysis is both its triumph and possibly its downfall. We are not a species known for self-honesty; we are not prone to exploring the roots of our pain. Rather than name that which we fear, it is, all too often, simply displaced. That is, we find our fear, anger or anxiety, in another place, so to speak. So it is with Dr. Grossman, the protagonist of the novel; guilty, we are told, in somewhat too linear a manner, not of invading the soul, of violating personal memory but of transgressing the body. Dr. Grossman is a New York psychoanalyst, divorced with one child. Weaving the past and the present, just as one might experience who was in therapy, Dani Shapiro gives us a fast moving, engrossing tale. The story pivots around the memory of Dr. Grossman's sexual indiscretion with a patient just as it is riveted, in

the present, by his search for his son. A son lost as a result of the wrecked marriage to a young, irritatingly entitled New York woman who flees, apparently with no second thoughts, the injury that the public revelation of her husband's indiscretion causes. That Mrs. Grossman comes from an exceptionally rich and devious family uncomplicates the normal difficulties such actions would entail.

Dr. Grossman compounds his one afternoon error by denial, non-communicating and by distancing himself from his new patient. Consequently the young woman, a beautiful photographer from Berlin - the protagonist's place of origin, is left with little recourse, in her frustration to reach him I suppose, but to report Dr. Grossman to his institute. At this point the story falters, since it would be unlikely for a psychoanalytic organization to hold a hearing, request that a member resign and then, with no apparent rationale whatsoever, announce to all the newspapers in New York the indiscretion of one of their esteemed members. Be that as it may, the story turns not so much on one flight from soul intimacy to body intimacy but rather as a search for a son. A son, now thirty or so, is an aviation crash inspector by profession.

Dani Shapiro sensitively conveys the thoughts of a adult man yearning to see what he has lost, troubled, as he reflects on his many years alone, not so much by a court order not to bother his former wife, but by a guilt he seems unable to resolve. The denouement of the story is Dr. Grossman's hurried decision to fly to Los Angeles to introduce himself to his adult son. Daniel, his son, is in Los Angeles inspecting the wreckage of a recent, tragic crash.

Dr. Grossman's meetings with Daniel, over a day and a half, are beautifully, realistically and dramatically portrayed. I felt a son's yearning and a father's grief. The final pages of the story are singularly evocative, caught as we are behind Dr. Grossman's eyes, surveying the present from a vantage point which only death can give. And even if the tragedies of the past seem too easily resolved, we understand and sympathize with Dr. Grossman as we recall the quote with which the author opens her story, a quotation from H. L. Mencken which reads: *Sin is a dangerous toy in the hands of the virtuous. It should be left to the congenitally sinful, who know when to play with it and when to let it alone.*

Shapiro's drama portrays a profound issue in human experience. That is, our need, all too often, to transgress and to undo ourselves. Had this been psychologically delineated in more detail, particularly since the protagonist is a psychoanalyst, the reader could have glimpsed a psychoanalytic vision

of the human condition, an understanding which is infinitely more complex than any popular judgment of sexual morality. Another reason for the facile dismissal of psychoanalysis, particularly in our current cultural climate, is its refusal to endorse, without deep reflection, what our society labels as either virtue or vice.

Picturing The Wreck will entertain you; it may even cause you to think about who is the sinner and what is the sin. A worthy enterprise.