

A BAD WEEK FOR THERAPY

Martha, late twenties, has come to see Harry, thirties, a therapist, because she is having trouble in her work and personal life. Martha is incredibly timid and needs help gaining the self-confidence that will make her a more effective human being. Harry, unfortunately, has had a bad week — his girlfriend and secretary left him, construction on his office building has begun, and his overbearing mother has dropped in unexpectedly. As the scene begins, Harry is trying to fill out standard forms with Martha.

CHARACTERS

Harry: 30s, a therapist

Martha: 20s, a new client

SETTING

Harry's office

TIME

The present

HARRY: Martha. *(Smiles.)* Good. Good. That's easy. *(Writes.)*
Last name?

MARTHA: Anderson.

HARRY: Easy too. *(Writing.)* My handwriting is something else here. I used to have a secretary who did this.

MARTHA: What happened to her? Did you fire her?

HARRY: No, no. She quit Monday out of the blue. With no warning.

MARTHA: That's terrible.

HARRY: Yeah, she left me high and dry. My files were a mess, my life was even . . . ! Anyway, not that I should be telling you this, Martha. Who wants an angry therapist, huh? Not that I'm angry. I'm not angry. Actually very calm and col-

lected, usually, but when your . . . secretary up and leaves, well . . . ! What's your address?

MARTHA: 4567 Elmwood, Apartment 24B, Waltham, MA 02154. I thought you might have fired her for being too quiet or timid. You see, I'm a little —

HARRY: *(Furious.)* Ten years we were together! *(Claps his hands.)* Five, four, three, two, one. *(He inhales deeply and then exhales. To Martha.)* So, how are you doing today?

MARTHA: Fine. I had a little trouble getting a parking space, but I'm fine.

HARRY: Oooh, I'm sorry to hear that. It's a little tough around here right now. Course them deciding to reconstruct the whole building out of nowhere last week . . . No warning! Not a bit of warning. That made things a little challenging. And then of course, my overbearing mother decides to drop by from Pittsburgh and I just want to slam her face into the . . . *(Exhales sharply.)* Just a bad week. OK, um, welcome, Martha. I'm so glad you're here. I just want to say that I like to create in my office a warm and pleasant and safe environment for you so that you can explore — do you hear that banging?

MARTHA: Um, a little.

HARRY: A little? It sounds like the roof is caving in. *(Looking up to the noise.)*

MARTHA: Now that you mention it, but it's not bad. I could get used to it. I got used to my neighbor's child who screamed around the clock. Now, I even like it.

HARRY: *(Calling to the ceiling.)* Shut up!! I'm trying to work down here! *(To Martha. Smiles.)* It feels good to get help, doesn't it? *(Noticing her expression.)* Oh gosh. Did I scare you, Martha?

MARTHA: *(Cowering.)* No.

HARRY: I'm sorry. I apologize. Things aren't generally so tense.

So um, do you have insurance?

MARTHA: Yes.

HARRY: OK. Good. *(Writes.)* It was just the abruptness of

everything that threw me really. It's not like I ever intended for us to become . . . Well, (*Laughs.*) I seem to be a bit distracted. I'm, I'm not usually distracted like this. OK, so um, so . . . um . . .

MARTHA: Did you break off your relationship with your secretary, Dr. Holden?

HARRY: Harry, please. Yes. Yes, Martha, we did. Actually, she did. (*He nods sadly.*)

MARTHA: I'm sorry to hear that.

HARRY: Thank you. Thank you, Martha. You just want a little kindness — a little sympathy. (*Wallowing in the moment, shaking out of it.*) OK. (*Claps.*) OK now. Um, let's not focus on me here. My focus is you. This is for you. This session is about you. Uh, let's talk about you. I'll just finish this form up and —

MARTHA: OK.

HARRY: Do you have insurance? (*She nods.*) Oh, you already told me that, didn't you? And, uh, the name of the plan?

MARTHA: Prudent.

HARRY: Terrific. (*Looking at the form.*) Oh gosh. Um . . . this form is quite long. I think that I should have my new secretary . . . (*Pausing because he's getting emotional. She pats his shoulder.*) when I hire her or him, fill the rest out with you next —

MARTHA: I could do it.

HARRY: Could you? No, no, no —

MARTHA: Sure, I'd like to. I could even straighten up those papers in the front office.

HARRY: Oh. (*Chuckles.*) Did, did you notice that? I just had a little accident with the filing cabinet. It's not usually on the floor like that.

MARTHA: I understand.

HARRY: Thank you for that. For all of this. So what brings you here today, Martha?

MARTHA: I really don't mind filling it out myself.

HARRY: Well thank you, but that's not necessary.

MARTHA: It's no trouble at all.

HARRY: Oh, no, really that's OK.

MARTHA: (*She reaches out for the form.*) I'll just take a second.

HARRY: (*Frustrated in general.*) I said no!! (*Martha pulls her hand back. Harry laughs.*) Ha. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Martha. That wasn't about you. That was not about you. I'm experiencing a little frustration today, about my own personal, ya know, stuff. Are you OK?

MARTHA: Uh-huh.

HARRY: Well . . . good. OK, so what brings you here?

MARTHA: Well, I . . .

HARRY: Yes.

MARTHA: I, I, uh, have a problem.

HARRY: OK. And . . . ?

MARTHA: I tend to be a little . . .

HARRY: Yes? Yes. Feel free to expound.

MARTHA: Shy and non — well, you know.

HARRY: No, no, no, I think it's better if you put it right out there on the table, Martha. Just expose it and let it breathe.

MARTHA: I'm just non, non, just a little non . . . I kind of have a thing about being non, non —

HARRY: (*Screaming.*) Spit it out!

MARTHA: Aggressive! (*Beat.*) Oh.

HARRY: OK. OK, we can work with that. It's OK, Martha.

That's very good. We're doing great here. Let's reel it in now. Both of us. Let's reel it in. Why don't we talk about your little nonaggressive issue in a positive way? Sometimes it's the connotation of the word that gets us. Let's make it . . . (*Waves hands.*) positive. What would be a positive way to say it?

MARTHA: (*Shrugs.*) Um. Uh. Well, well, let me think. Um . . . (*Harry is in his own world. He stares into space and sighs.*)

MARTHA: Assertive?

HARRY: (*Harry is still somewhere else. To himself.*) Why?

MARTHA: (*Seeking approval.*) I suppose because it doesn't

sound quite so mean? *(Beat.)* Is that not good? *(Beat.)* Doctor?

HARRY: Huh? Oh, yes. That's it! Very good, Martha. Assertive. Very positive. Now, um, tell me how you plan to work on that or something?

MARTHA: Well, I would like to work on being more assertive because my boss said I need to be more confident if I want to move up and be a real sales associate. And I would like to —

HARRY: *(Somewhere else.)* Uh-huh.

MARTHA: Be more confident in my life so I feel better about myself. *(Pause.)* Doctor?

HARRY: *(Startled.)* Yep!

MARTHA: Don't you think I should talk about my family of origin to gain some insight into why I have such a lack of self-confidence?

HARRY: *(Casually.)* Yeah, that sounds good. I mean, yes, I was just going to suggest that. Go ahead there, Martha.

MARTHA: Well, my parents split up when I was six and I think that really, really had a profound and terrible effect on me and the way that I am.

HARRY: Well, it's better than an overbearing mother who makes you sing in the boy's choir when you obviously can't sing. *(Beat.)* Go on.

MARTHA: My mother had to work three jobs once the divorce went through. We went to live with my grandmother who was very strict and cold. I don't just mean cold-cold. She was often really cold. She always fell asleep over the covered radiator. I used to bang around in the kitchen to wake her up. She would get all startled and say, "Oh, oh, oh." And then go back to sleep. She hated children, but she was the one raising me.

HARRY: *(Quietly.)* Whine, whine, whine.

MARTHA: I'm sorry. I didn't mean to —

HARRY: Not you, Martha! Everyone! Every one of my patients goes on and on — whine, whine, whine about their bad

childhood. Do you think you're the only one? We all had bad childhoods. They sucked! I bet Cynthia had a bad childhood too. Well, so did I, Missy. So did I!

MARTHA: Who's Cynthia?

HARRY: Never mind. I'm sorry. Forget that. Please go on, Martha.

MARTHA: Anyway, um, my grandma was old-fashioned. She would say, "Children should be seen and not heard." At the dinner table every night, my mother and grandmother would talk about things that happened in their day and I was expected to be silent. I was so sad, but there was no point in speaking or I would be reprimanded by my grandma. Later, my mother would take a special moment to sit down on the couch and talk to me, but she always fell asleep because she was exhausted from all the jobs.

HARRY: *(Sniffing to himself.)* Yes, yes, she left you. Left you. You must accept that.

MARTHA: Well . . . she lives in Dedham. It's not that far. But I guess you could say figuratively she left me when she fell asleep when I was a child. I guess you're right, doctor. She left me. She did leave me. Anyway, I started to think that I had a dull voice because sometimes I was answering questions at school and it was like I could hear the other students dropping off to sleep. I'm not kidding. And my teachers seemed like they weren't listening most of the time because their eyes glazed over when I spoke. Soon, I started to feel there was no point in me talking at all because no one was listening. That's why I'm here. I'm so glad to finally come to therapy because finally I know that someone is truly listening to me. This is the main reason I think I'm not very assertive maybe, doctor. What do you think? *(Harry is out of it.)* Doctor?

HARRY: Huh? Oh yes, yes that's great.

MARTHA: Great? I just told you I had a very sad childhood because no one listened to me.

HARRY: Oh. Yes. Right. Well, the reason that's, that's, that's

great . . . is because, we seem to have narrowed down the problem.

MARTHA: We? I don't think *we* have done anything. In fact, I don't think you were listening to me at all! (*Gasps.*) I didn't mean to yell.

HARRY: Yes, I was. Yes. I. Was.

MARTHA: What did I say then, Dr. Holden?

HARRY: Um, well, (*Clears throat.*) among lots of things, some things about people not listening and . . . in your childhood and . . . that kind of —

MARTHA: Well, aren't you supposed to be asking me questions as I go along? Making suggestions?

HARRY: (*Getting defensive.*) Well, yes. Of course. That's my job. I didn't realize you were so *aware* of all the steadfast rules and regulations of conducting therapy.

MARTHA: Well, I'm aware enough to know you are supposed to be focusing on me instead of your pathetic, adolescent relationship with your mother-replacing secretary Cynthia!! (*Realizing.*) Oh. I'm sorry. Good God. I'm so sorry.

HARRY: Adolescent? Mother-replacing? (*He starts to tear up.*)

MARTHA: I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

HARRY: (*Trying not to cry.*) I didn't realize you had so much background in psychology to know so much about my personal dysfunctionality with my mother and girlfriend. Shall we continue?

MARTHA: Oh, no, no, I don't think you have dysfunctionality. I don't think that at all. You're doing a great job with me.

HARRY: Just because I've had a lot of personal pain and agony in the last twenty-four hours, not to mention major reconstruction and the witch dropping in, doesn't mean I can't focus on your little problems, on your little . . . thingies. (*Starting to cry.*) It's just really, really, really, really, hard, ya know?

MARTHA: I know. I know. And I'm so, so sorry. I didn't mean to — wait a minute. What am I talking about? I'm not sorry. I'm paying you! Not the other way around.

HARRY: Well, maybe I'm doing something experimental? Something different? Something you didn't learn about in Pysch 101? Ever think of that? (*Calling up to the upstairs. Standing.*) Stop banging!! I'm creating an atmosphere that's calming!

MARTHA: Calming, my tushy! (*Points.*) Sit down! You heard me. Sit down. (*He does.*) Now, you listen to me, Whiney. She left! OK? Cynthia has left. Why? Probably because you never married her and treated her like she was a secretary.

HARRY: Well . . .

MARTHA: I am your patient. I paid for this session while you were out to lunch thinking about every other thing under the sun. Your mother, your girlfriend, the building's construction, your cat, your dog —

HARRY: We never had a dog —

MARTHA: (*Closing her hands together.*) Shhh! (*He's quiet.*) I will forget all this mess and won't go to the licensing board on the strict condition that you give me a free, completely-dedicated-to-me session next week! Do you understand?

HARRY: Yes. I understand. No problem. I will. No problem.

MARTHA: (*Realizing.*) Oh my God! (*Getting happy.*) Oh my God! I was . . . I was . . . assertive! Ha ha! You are good! You are so good, doctor!

HARRY: Oh. Yes. Well . . . you know, I like to . . . try new things . . . and this is a good day to toss away the old and make room for the (*Sniffs.*) new.

MARTHA: I can't believe this. I feel so empowered! I'm going to recommend you to everyone I know. (*Shaking his hand.*) Thank you! Thank you so much, Dr. Holden! How can I ever repay you?

HARRY: Well, you did offer to maybe help me clean up the filing cabinet out there a little.

MARTHA: Did I? I'm sure I did. (*Realizing.*) Ha! But I'm cured now! (*Firmly.*) Pick it up yourself. (*Pats his back.*) Ooh, I just love this! (*Exiting.*) Happy cleaning!