

What Rough Beast



Les Demoiselles d'Avignon by Pablo Picasso, 1907

“There is no beast, no rush of fire, like woman so untamed.
She calmly goes her way where even panthers would be shamed.”
– Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*

The following is based on a true story with identifying information changed to protect patient privacy.

by [Abilash A. Gopal](#) (January 2022)

The boy shuffled into my office and sat on the couch with stooped shoulders. He was a lanky stripling with light skin and tousled black hair that peeked out from beneath his faded baseball cap.

"Thanks for coming in, Dylan. I spoke with your father over the phone and he told me a little about what's been going on with you." I smiled at him reassuringly. "We have plenty of time to talk, so feel free to start wherever you like."

His restive eyes roved about the room. "I like your books," he said finally.

"Oh really? Which ones?"

"Well you got *Lord Of The Flies*, which is cool." He lifted his cap to squint. "And I think I see *A Separate Peace* up there too. Loved that book."

"Yup, both great stories about boyhood. Did you read them at school?"

"Yeah, but my class was the last year they taught them." He frowned. "They hired this diversity coordinator, and she said we were reading too many books by white men."

"Interesting. How do you feel about that?"

"Whatever. Least of my problems."

"So I hear. Tell me about what happened with your girlfriend. Your father said that things escalated between the two of you, and now the school is involved. Sounds like a bad situation."

He stared at the ground grimly. "It's worse than bad. They're talking about kicking me off the baseball team. If that happens I'll lose my scholarship to play in college."

"My goodness, I didn't realize the stakes were so high." I tried to meet his eyes. "Your father didn't tell me exactly

what you said, but it sounds like you lashed out at her.”

“Yeah,” he sighed.

“What did you say?”

“Uh,” Dylan hesitated. “Is what we talk about here private? I don’t want to get in any more trouble.”

“Don’t worry, whatever you tell me is confidential. I’m here to help you.”

He took a deep breath. “Well, I think I called her a whore and a psycho bitch. And I said she might as well just kill herself. I really went off.” He looked at me for a moment and then pulled his hat down over his eyes.

“Sounds pretty harsh,” I said gently.

“Yep.”

“Maybe you could tell me a little more about your relationship with her. Do you guys have a lot of conflict?”

“We do fight a lot, but she’s really passionate, you know? I like that about her.”

“I hear you. How did this fight start?”

“I dunno, our fights kinda blur together.” He lifted his hat and rubbed his forehead. “I think she was pissed I wasn’t spending enough time with her.”

“Interesting. Is that something you fight about frequently?”

“Yeah.” He sighed. “It’s like the end of the world if I can’t hang out.”

“What do you mean?”

“If I’m ever too busy, she says it means I don’t give a shit about her. Doesn’t matter if it’s homework, baseball practice,

hanging with my friends, whatever.” He grimaced. “And if I say I need some space, she flips out and calls me a misogynist or something like that. That’s always her trump card.”

“Gosh, that doesn’t sound fair.”

“That’s what I say.” Dylan removed his hat and ran his hand through his mussed hair. “Look, I know I messed up, but I try really hard to respect women. My mom’s always pushing me to be anti-sexist.”

“Anti-sexist?”

“Yeah, like every day I need to be fighting against the patriarchy.”

“Wow. What do you think about that?”

“Honestly?” He slid his cap on backwards and shrugged. “I don’t think it makes any sense at all.”

“Tell me what you mean.”

“Well, it’s like men get blamed for everything and women can do no wrong. But the truth is my girlfriend’s got issues too. She’s no angel.”

“What do you mean, she’s no angel?”

Dylan looked at me askance. “Didn’t my father tell you that part?”

“No. He just told me about the angry texts you sent her.”

“That’s pretty convenient,” he muttered. “*She’s* the one who started it. She threatened to sleep with the entire baseball team! Just because I refused to hang out with her!” He grabbed his head in frustration. “Then she posted this video from a houseparty where she’s grinding on one of my teammates, like basically dry humping him on the dance floor. And then later she posted nudes on her Snap. Like her whole body, totally

exposed. It was fucking crazy!”

We were both silent. I stared at his anguished face and felt deep sympathy for his plight. “I’m so sorry to hear that, Dylan,” I said quietly. “Your girlfriend’s behavior is highly manipulative.”

“She pulls this shit all the time,” he moaned, pulling his face down as he fell back against the couch. “And if I try to break up with her, she freaks out and says that makes her want to kill herself. It’s fucking torture.”

“Of course, I understand,” I said gently. “Her behavior is a form of emotional abuse. She seems to have borderline traits.”

He eyed me between his hands. “Borderline?”

“It’s a disorder where the person is extremely needy, prone to drastic mood swings, and terrified of abandonment. In fact, people with borderline will often threaten to kill themselves if their partner tries to end the relationship. It’s mostly seen in women.”

“Fuck,” he exhaled sharply. “I feel like you just described her to a T.”

“What a terrible situation,” I said, shaking my head. “I don’t understand why your father didn’t tell me about this.”

“Probably because my mom was nearby.” He sighed aggrievedly. “She totally controls him.”

“What do you mean?”

“I dunno, he’s like scared to speak his mind when she’s around. If they disagree about something he’ll usually just keep quiet.”

“I see. So your mother is the dominant one in their marriage.”

Dylan frowned as he considered this. “I don’t like to think of

it that way, but you're probably right."

"Has that always been the case?"

"Well ... my dad did have an affair. But that was a long time ago! And you know what? I don't even blame him for it." He folded his arms across his chest.

"Was it because your mom wasn't nice to him?"

"I don't think she's ever loved him! She just uses his money to do whatever she wants. Since his affair she's become super-feminist, and now she has this blog ..." He shook his head and covered his face.

"What blog?"

"Oh God, it's hard to even talk about, it's so fucking cringe. She posts ... pictures of herself."

"You mean, provocative pictures?"

"Yeah," he moaned.

"My goodness." I shook my head. "You must be so embarrassed."

"It's a fucking nightmare. My friends will never let it go."

"I'm sure," I sighed. "What does your father think? He must be embarrassed too."

"Facts. We've begged her to take the pictures down but she won't do it. She says it's her way of empowering herself." He threw his hands up in disgust.

"Gosh... it's like she really doesn't care about how this is affecting you. It's only about what she wants."

"Exactly!" Dylan sat forward suddenly, his eyes blazing. "The truth is I can't stand her bullshit. She's so controlling and nitpicking and if I push back she says I have no respect for

women. And if I ever try to take space from her she immediately flips out!"

"Hmm," I said, stroking my chin. "Have you noticed that your mother and girlfriend seem to share some of the same characteristics?"

He made a face. "Ugh. I never thought about it that way, but now that you mention it ..."

"The truth is that it's common for a person to end up in relationships with people who remind them of their parents. We're attracted to what's familiar, and it's hard to break certain patterns."

He sat there pensively and then finally turned the bill of his cap so it was facing front once more. "What you're saying makes sense."

"Ok. We have to stop soon because I think your mother would like to meet with me as well. Was there anything else you wanted to tell me before we finish?"

Dylan was silent for a moment. "Well ... do you think you could speak to my school at some point? I feel like it could really help." He looked at me hopefully.

"I'd be happy to. I know you've made some mistakes, but I think you're a good kid." I smiled and extended my hand. "I look forward to helping you in whatever way I can."

"For sure Doc." He stood tall and shook my hand firmly.

Dylan left and outside my office I heard his mother's querulous voice as she accosted him, then his laconic response and footsteps trailing off as he walked out of the building. After a moment, there came a sharp rap at the door.

I opened it and the mother strode into my office and perched upon my couch, a meretricious Asian lady in skinny jeans and

an alarmingly low-cut blouse. She scanned me and then examined her crimson nails. "I didn't expect you to look so young, Doctor." She flipped her hair and fixed her vulpine eyes upon me.

"Thanks for coming in," I said, avoiding her suggestive stare. "I enjoyed meeting with your son, and I wanted to tell you my thoughts."

"Good." She pulled a notebook from her leopard-print purse. "Before we start, are you familiar with Cognitive Behavioral Therapy – CBT? I want to make sure Dylan's therapist is well-versed in that."

"I am," I nodded. "I've been trained in multiple modalities, although to be honest I tend to adapt my style to the individual patient. I think that's the best way to form a genuine connection."

She scribbled in her notebook and frowned. "Well, we want CBT. My husband agrees."

"Mm-hm. In terms of Dylan's well-being, he is reporting significant stress, much of which seems related to trouble in his relationship with his girlfriend, as well as some conflict with you."

"Yes. Well let's focus on what Dylan did to his poor girlfriend." She sighed dramatically. "You don't know how disappointed I am in having raised such a misogynist."

"You don't feel that the girl has an equally important role in their conflict?"

"God no," she snorted. "Need I remind you of the epidemic of toxic masculinity in our culture? All young men today are afflicted, and my son is certainly no exception."

"I understand that's the prevailing perspective, but I think it's a mistake to demonize an entire gender. Both men and

women are quite capable of bad behavior.”

The mother studied me for a moment before responding. “Did Dylan mention his girlfriend’s background?”

“Background?”

“I don’t think you have the full picture, doctor. Dylan’s girlfriend is Latinx.” She placed her hand over her heart. “She’s a woman of color, like me.”

“Right. Well presumably that would make your son biracial,” I chuckled.

“Dylan passes as white. He takes after his father, unfortunately,” she said, shaking her head. “In any case, I have a strong kinship with this young lady, and my heart goes out to her for everything my son has put her through. I’ve been keeping tabs on her through text. I want to make sure she’s getting the support she needs.”

“Hmm...I’d caution you against that. It’s important to have appropriate boundaries. Her parents are the right ones to be supporting her.”

“Actually, I’m the ideal person to support her.”

“Why is that?”

“I’m a feminine embodiment coach.” The mother slowly crossed her legs.

“I’m sorry, I’m not familiar with—”

“You should see my social media, Doctor.” She leaned back and stretched her arm out against the couch, an inveterate vamp. “My female empowerment photo shoots are booked out months in advance. I have literally thousands of followers. I’m what’s called an ‘influencer.’”

There was an awkward silence, and I eyed the clock in the

corner of the room. "Ok, I want to be mindful of our time. In terms of Dylan's treatment, I'm recommending a course of therapy to help him manage stress and navigate relationship conflict. Do you have other questions for me?"

Her false eyelashes fluttered in irritation. "Not at the moment. Let's go ahead and schedule some follow up visits. Can we lock in this time for the next three weeks?" She raised a manicured finger. "Although I do want to inform you that I'll be interviewing other therapists. I want to make sure that Dylan has the very best care to help him get back on track."

"Makes sense. I believe I can help your son, and I'll be sure to reserve this time for him."

"Good." She picked up her purse and brushed past me towards the door. "And go ahead and charge my husband's credit card for your time today."

I closed the door and sat at my desk to complete Dylan's assessment. I was concerned about the mother's toxic influence but optimistic about the boy's potential and keen to meet with him again.

A few days later I received an email from Dylan's mother cc'ing her husband. She was canceling all future appointments with me because she wanted to find a "better fit" for her son. She assured me that she would circle back if she needed anything else, as she wasn't ruling out the possibility that Dylan needed to be put on medication. "We want to make absolutely sure that he doesn't cause harm to anyone else," she wrote.

I sat there slumped at my desk, disheartened by the mother's missive. I racked my brain to think of a proper response but it was no use. She was determined to control the boy's treatment.

Days passed but I still thought of Dylan and his plight. I

finally decided to email Dylan's father to see if he was willing to meet individually. He responded at once and we set a time to meet the next day.

Dylan's father was a tall, wiry entrepreneur with patrician features and striking blue eyes. He pushed back his sandy hair and chuckled. "Well Doctor, you caused quite a stir in my household."

"Really? What do you mean?"

"My son really liked talking with you, but my wife thinks you're a misogynist. We spent all night arguing about whether he could see you again."

"I see. So you were open to me meeting with your son again?"

"Oh yes." He leaned back and smiled thoughtfully. "Dylan doesn't often praise people, but he said that you spoke the truth. That's rare nowadays."

"I have to say I enjoyed meeting with him as well. He's quite insightful and well-intentioned too. I really think I can help him."

The father nodded. "He's a real truth-seeker. I think that's part of why he sometimes struggles at school. You know how it is at these elite Bay Area private schools," he offered.

"I do indeed. Boys like him are starving for the truth. They're sick of the social justice warrior, virtue-signaling nonsense. Not to mention the rampant prejudice against white males."

"That's right! The school has completely taken the girl's side in this whole kerfuffle. They're ordering my son to give a presentation on the history of slut-shaming to his entire class." He shook his head incredulously. "The whole thing is bonkers!"

"It's disgraceful. These schools have lost all ability to guide young men and women in a healthy direction. They're only interested in showing fealty to progressive pieties."

The father sat forward, nodding ardently. "I can see now why Dylan enjoyed his conversation with you. It's a breath of fresh air."

"Unfortunately, it sounds like your wife disagrees."

"My wife," he groaned. "Where to begin? We seem to be divided on just about everything."

"What do you mean?"

"How much time do you have?" the father quipped. "There's a long backstory here that I don't necessarily want to bore you with."

"Well ... Dylan did mention that there was infidelity in the past."

"I was wondering whether he mentioned that." The father sighed. "It was a long time ago, but I still feel terrible about it. I pride myself on being a loyal person, and I was a failure in that regard."

"I understand. Do you think perhaps there were dynamics in your marriage that contributed to the affair?"

The father looked away. "I see what you're getting at, but I want to hold myself accountable for my actions, no matter what was going on between my wife and I at the time."

"Of course," I nodded gently. "And what was going on between you and your wife?"

"Well in my view there was a rift between us, although she always denied it." A pall fell across his face. "I felt very alone in the marriage. Frankly, it was like she didn't give a

shit about me.”

“That’s terrible. It sounds like she completely shut you out.”

“She gave me nothing. No respect, no affection, not even a simple hello when I came home from a long day of work. Just this cold silence.” He threw his hands up in exasperation. “So I made the mistake of straying. And now, after all this time and my endless apologies, she still uses my affair as the trump card in every argument. She refuses to let it go. It’s like she gets some sick thrill from torturing me about it!”

“I empathize with your plight,” I said quietly. “It sounds like you’ve been in a loveless marriage for some time. Have you thought about leaving?”

“My friends have been urging me to leave her for years but I haven’t been able to do it.” He clenched his jaw and closed his eyes. “My father left my mother for his mistress, and it ruined our family. I promised myself I would never do that.”

“Yes, divorce can be so damaging. But you also have to consider the harmful effects of staying in the current family dynamic. Your wife appears to be neglectful of your needs and highly manipulative as well. I worry that she displays the same type of behavior towards your son.”

The father shook his head in silence and then erupted: “She torments him! Nothing he does is ever good enough for her!” He stabbed the air with his finger furiously. “She picks at him constantly, and he just takes it, and takes it. He tries to stay strong and appease her but I know my son, I can see how it hurts him and I just want to grab him and hold him in my arms to shield him from her!” His voice cracked as he lurched forward in a bear hug, tears streaming down his stricken face.

The room was silent but for the father’s labored breathing. “You care so much about your son,” I said softly. “I know you want to do everything you can to protect him.”

"Yes." He wiped away his tears and stared at me with disgust. "Do you know that my wife doesn't even care if Dylan loses his baseball scholarship? Sports are all toxic masculinity, as far as she's concerned!"

"My goodness," I said, shaking my head slowly. "That would destroy his future."

"Not on my watch," the father avowed. He took a deep breath and composed himself. "Thank you so much for seeing me today. This was exactly what I needed to hear. I'm going to make sure my son sees you. His future depends on it."

We stood and shook hands earnestly. I showed him to the door and he turned to stand tall in the threshold, a strapping paladin with vibrant blue eyes. "I'm going to give my wife an ultimatum. Either Dylan sees you, or I'm gone. I'm not going to let her push me around anymore."

I was hopeful once more, and I planned to check in with Dylan's father before long. One week later I arrived at my office to see that a crowd had gathered on the street outside. I pushed through the scrum to see a morbidly obese white woman in a flimsy bikini posing for a photographer who crouched before her. "What's the matter?" she bellowed at the gawking crowd. "Haven't you ever seen a model before?" To her right was an unctuous woman handing out cards that read "Feminine Embodiment Coach."

I suppressed a shudder and weaved my way through the crowd into the building. As I marched upstairs I decided to call the boy's father. He picked up at once.

"This is Dr. Gopal. I wanted to check in to see how your son was doing."

"Dr. Gopal, good to hear from you!" he responded heartily. "Thanks for reaching out. I've been giving a lot of thought to our conversation."

"Have you made any decisions regarding Dylan's treatment?"

"You know, he actually seems to be doing better. He's apologized to his girlfriend and I think they've patched things up."

I frowned. "Hmm...are you sure it's a healthy relationship? As I recall they used to fight quite frequently."

There was a pause. "Hold on a moment, Doctor," he said sotto voce.

I stood and waited, gazing outside my office window. Below the portly woman was still posing, a repulsive parody of pulchritude. A man who was walking by tried to shield his little girl from the grotesque scene and the woman seized upon him like a savage. "Don't you *dare* body-shame me, little man!" she snarled. "You need to show your daughter what a real woman looks like! Look at me when I'm talking to you!" The father raised his hands repentantly then grabbed his daughter to back away but she pulled against him, enthralled by the spectacle. I shook my head in disgust.

"Sorry about that," the father finally said. "Let's get something on the books, I really want Dylan to continue seeing you."

"Great. I could meet with him as soon as tomorrow."

"Ah yes, let's circle back on that!" he replied loudly. In the background I could hear his wife's vulturous voice approaching. "I promise I won't leave you hanging," he whispered. Before I could respond the phone went dead, and I never heard from him again.

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Dr. Gopal is an adult, adolescent, and forensic psychiatrist based in California. He received his education at Princeton, Tufts, Harvard, and UCSF. He regularly writes for the popular press, including opinion pieces on [reclaiming masculinity](#), [the rise in child transgenderism](#), and [the perils of helicopter parenting](#). He also maintains a [concierge private practice](#) with psychotherapy at the core of his work

This story is an excerpt from Dr. Gopal's forthcoming collection of non-fiction essays that invites the reader where few have the privilege of sitting, the chair of a therapist. These incredible patient stories weave together a dramatic narrative that exposes a terrifying truth: America is gravely ill, and without intervention, she will die.

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