

Kate Fustich

*50 Minute Hours*

I'm gifted with my first therapist at the age of 12. I have simultaneously finished elementary school and the friendship that had run the length of it. My best friend Kaylin and I had feuded over Fall Out Boy tickets at the end of the school year to such a degree that she changed schools because she never wanted to see me again. Perhaps this also had something to do with her mother's severe opiate addiction, but at the time it was a purely F.O.B.-related incident.

I'm not sad. I'm too busy getting my period and preparing for middle school to be overly-wrought with agony. Yet my mom thinks the fact that I start organizing my closet by color is some sort of emotional sublimation. So, one afternoon I am escorted to the Allegheny Mental Health Services building and introduced to my new social worker, Pam.

Pam H., MSW is tall. She moves a bit like a Velociraptor, with the upper half of her body tilted forward over hips filling out knee-length jean shorts with flower embroidery. Her hair is streaky blonde and brown, cut at many confusing angles like the mother from *John and Kate Plus Eight*. She's tan. Too tan. Tan in a way that makes her eyes and veins bulge when she squeals "Hi!" with an overspread smile.

Beyond this, she isn't a very good therapist. Her office is filled with toys, and I can understand why she would be good with kids. "Show the doll where he touched you."

But at the age of 12 I am a fully functioning adult, even close to collecting social security. I don't have the patience for being talked down to. Sometimes she doesn't know what to say to me and just talks about her vacations or her rotary club meetings.

It becomes increasingly clear that the real reason I have been brought to Pam is not because of my mental anguish (don't worry, my anxiety will blossom soon enough) but because my mom and I haven't been getting along. She doesn't understand my indoctrination into punk culture and perhaps hopes a good shakedown from the mental health authorities will frighten some sense into me. This doesn't happen. Instead, we loathe Pam together in an almost conspiratorial way. I loathe her because she treats me the age I am. My mom loathes her because she blames my mom for all of my problems. This loathing brings us closer than ever before.

Debbie W., PhD is next. I need her after my first boyfriend (of nine months) dumps me. He had opened the door a crack when I arrived to his house and told me through the opening he just didn't love me anymore. I find Debbie via the internet. I choose her because the name of her office is W- & W-. I assume this means she works alongside her husband, two lovers as devoted to each other as they are to the common good. I find this incredibly romantic and make an appointment. It turns out the other W- is actually her brother.

Nevertheless, I love Debbie. She looks like a crow and speaks as if her mouth is full of steak. There's a miniature sandbox on the table in her office and I build tiny castles so I don't have to make eye contact with her while I tell her about how my now ex-boyfriend is dating someone much fatter and dumber and entirely less worthy than me. Debbie takes my concerns very seriously. She doesn't need to constantly reference her notepad when referencing some obscure friend.

With a few months of her treatment, I start to feel better. I develop a crush on someone else and we talk about him. Then I hug her and thank her for everything and think I'll never need to come back.

But I do come back just two years later. Same shit, different guy. I am dumped by my secret 27-year-old boyfriend from work just three weeks before I graduate high school. My family pictures from the morning of my graduation are shots of me wiping my eyes on my polyester sleeve interspersed with me fully bawling. The sadness is a little more real this time and Debbie understands that, too. She has one of those Zen sandboxes on table and I spend a lot of time dragging the tiny rake through it.

At times, I think she is unsure of what to say. When I tell her that my mom and I are planning a trip to Disney World, she latches onto that. She's one of those Disney people who collect the pins and get the Fast Passes and knows where to find the princesses depending on where the sun is in the sky. So, we talk about Disney. And then I go to college.

I have my first panic attack at the age of 19. It's late at night and I am on the bus, on my way to meet a boy I met through a foreign language exchange program. He's Italian, with blue eyes and impossibly skinny legs. He uses lots of smiley faces in his messages, yet every inch of air around me is shivering with the fact that I could not want to see him less.

The bus takes the long route and about halfway to my destination, I begin to feel strange. I look out the window and see a man on a bike pass. Only his face is long and melting like hot brown wax. The lights seem to twitch, though when I focus on them they're not flickering at all. I suddenly become certain that everyone is staring directly at me, no matter which way I turn my head.

I stay on the bus until it brings me back home. I message the boy and tell him the completely believable lie that my brother was in an accident and broke both of his legs, so I couldn't go out.

I don't wait to see what he says. I fall asleep immediately.

A few weeks later, I pay \$50 to speak with a therapist in an online chat room. She doesn't directly tell me what I want to hear within the first ten minutes, so I spend the rest of the session half-heartedly telling her irrelevant facts about my childhood.

I see Naomi the summer after my freshman year of college. I am struggling to re-assimilate into three months of ordinary suburban society. I am also struggling with the fact that my grandma died in March and my parents waited until May to tell me.

Naomi does a lot of pro-bono work and group therapy; hence her office is in an old church that has since been converted to a community center. Nearly every time I arrive for an appointment, I am forced to sneak through the back of an AA meeting.

Naomi is doughy and always flushed. She dresses in numerous loose layers and has at least three fans going at all times. She has a slight lisp and is very committed to remedying the emotional injustices of the world. She does not take too kindly to the news that my parents kept me in the dark about my grandma's death. The whole thing makes her huff quite a bit. It starts to feel like she wants me to hate them more than I want to. In a way, this helps me come to forgive them.

I begin seeing my third therapist, Beth, almost exclusively to discuss the various men and women I am meeting on OkCupid.

Beth is very beautiful and young almost to a fault. She wears Marc Jacobs and when she crosses her legs and the hem of her pants is tugged up slightly, I can see the rose tattoo around her ankle. Her hair is short and bright red, like the love interest in a superhero comic.

I like Beth a lot, or maybe I'm just intimidated by her. She tells me I am very self aware in a way that makes it seem like I have a hidden motive. She also doesn't write down anything I say.

Unfortunately, I can only see Beth for so long. She is my first therapist as an adult and therefore not covered by my parents' insurance. She costs \$125 per 50-minute session and I work part-time at Urban Outfitters solely to fund my mental health needs. Though, it soon becomes quite clear that Urban Outfitters is a detriment to my mental health and so I make the sacrifice to quit and no longer see Beth.

When I tell her this information, she is disappointed, but smirks in a way that says I will be able to figure it all out on my own.

After bleeding my bank account dry whilst trying to stay sane, I am forced to consider my other options. I learn that my university offers up to ten free counseling sessions and immediately call the health hotline to schedule my consultation.

About a week later, I meet Sarah. She is slender and soft. She is likely no older than 50, but her premature grey hair, passion for pea-green sweaters and Teva sandals make her seem ten years older.

Every appointment begins with a worksheet. I answer the same questions about my appetite, my sleep habits, my desire to harm myself. I am incredibly depressed, sure, but it's not impacting my capacity to make a burrito disappear in five minutes.

Where's the question about my compulsive need to discuss my relationships with a caregiving figure? Who can tell me whether or not my desire for therapy is connected to that one time my mom saw me kissing a boy and told me it made her feel like someone died? I don't actually ask these questions, but I switch up my answers to the worksheet every now and then so that my place here is never questioned?

In order to maximize my ten appointments, I schedule them every other week. It becomes apparent this is simply not enough when I find myself coming in for an "emergency session" with one of the other doctors so I can discuss the ways in which various people did and did not text me back. I am tolerated for about thirty minutes and then graciously informed that I am abusing the mental health system.

No matter my efforts, I run out of time with Sarah regardless. She seems sad to watch me go. Not because she'll miss my company and/or my drivel, but because she doesn't seem entirely certain that I'll be safe out there on my own. I shrug and skip off to whatever comes next.

I come across an essay about a boy who met a girl he really liked. On the same day he asked her to be his girlfriend, he started therapy—as though he cared about her so desperately and was so certain he was going to damage things that he needed an added layer of protection between himself and his actions. At the time, I think this is incredibly romantic. Saving someone else from yourself—how thoughtful.

I go to the doctor's office one summer because I am convinced that I have diabetes. Hyperthyroid at the very least. But instead of leaving with insulin, I leave with Lexapro. It's a catch all designed to treat OCD, Anxiety Disorder, and Depression. I don't really understand why it's given to me, but two weeks later it makes me twitch and pass out on the floor of a Chinese restaurant.

I reach a point where I'm utterly convinced that I have it all figured out. I am indignant towards the memory of my former therapists; even rude to a professor I have who looks and talks like one of them. Or maybe it's just because she wears sweater vests.

I bite my nails and spit them out on the sidewalk. No one can tell me what to do; what level of softness to be. I am unmalleable but also formless. I am every color. I can produce every sound. People know who I am when I go somewhere. No one ever really helped me, I got here on my own. My entire being resonates that much. And yet,

I'm still a little sad.