

KEYHOLES

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The opening segment of an unfinished, unpublished short story

Conklin's first, snap, judgement was that this man, Michael Briggs, was not the sort of fellow who usually sought psychiatric help. He was dressed in dark courderoy [sic] pants, a neat blue shirt, and a sport-coat that matched—sort-of-both. His hair was long, almost shoulder-length. His face was sunburned. His large hands were chapped, scabbed in a number of places, and when he reached over the desk to shake, he felt the rasp of rough callouses.

“Hello, Mr. Briggs.”

“Hello.” Briggs smiled—a small ill-at-ease smile. His eyes moved about the room and centered on the couch—it was an eye movement Conklin had seen before, but it was not one Conklin associated with people who had been in therapy before—they knew the couch would be there. This Briggs with his work-hardened hands and sunburned face was looking for the profession's most well-known symbol—the one they saw in the movies and the magazine cartoons.

“You're a construction worker?” Conklin asked.

“Yes.” Briggs sat down carefully across the desk.

“You want to talk to me about your son?”

“Yes.”

“Jeremy.”

“Yes.”

A little silence fell. Conklin, used to using silence as his tool, was less uncomfortable with it than Briggs obviously was. Mrs. Adrian, his nurse and receptionist, had taken the call five days before, and had

said Briggs sounded distraught—a man who had control, she said, but by inches. Conklin’s speciality was not child psychology and his schedule was full, but Nancy Adrian’s assessment of that man behind the bare facts typed onto the printed form in front of him had intrigued him. Michael Briggs was forty-five, a construction worker who lived in Lovinger, New York, a town forty miles north of New York City. He was a widower. He wanted to consult with Conklin about his son, Jeremy, who was seven. Nancy had promised him a call-back by the end of the day.

“Tell him to try Milton Abrams in Albany,” Conklin had said, sliding the form back across the desk toward her.

“Can I suggest you see him once before you decide that?” Nancy Abrams [sic] asked.

Conklin looked at her, then leaned back in his chair and took out his cigarette case. Each morning he filled it with exactly ten Winston 100’s—when they were gone, he was done smoking until the next day. It was not as good as quitting; he knew that. It was just a truce he had been able to reach. Now it was the end of the day—no more patients, anyway—and he deserved a cigarette. And Nancy’s reaction to Briggs intrigued him. Such suggestions as this were not unheard of, but they were rare...and the woman’s intuitions were good.

“Why?” he asked, lighting the cigarette.

“Well, I suggested Milton Abrams—he’s close to where this man Briggs is, and he likes kids—but Briggs knows him a little—he worked on a construction crew that built a pool addition at Abrams’s country house two years ago. He says he would go to him if you still recommended it after hearing what he has to say, but that he wanted to tell a total stranger first and get an opinion. He said, ‘I’d tell a priest if I was Catholic.’”

“Um.”

“He said, ‘I just want to know what’s going on with my kid—if it’s me or what.’ He sounded aggressive about it, but he also sounded very, very scared.”

“The boy is—”

“Seven.”

“Um. And you want me to see him.”

She shrugged, then grinned. She was forty-five, but when she grinned she still looked twenty. “He sounded...concrete. As though he could tell a clear story with no shadows. Phenomena, not ephemera.”

“Quote me all you want—I still won’t raise your salary.”

She wrinkled her nose at him, then grinned. In his way he loved Nancy Abrams [sic]—once, over drinks, he had called her the Della Street of psychiatry, and she had almost hit him. But he valued her insights, and here came one now, clear and simple:

“He sounded like a man who thinks there’s something physical wrong with his son. Except he called the of a New York psychiatrist. An expensive New York psychiatrist. And he sounded scared.”

“All right. Enough.” He butted the cigarette—not without regret. “Book him next week—Tuesday or Wednesday—around four.”

And here it was, Wednesday afternoon—not around four but 4:03 on the nose—and here was Mr. Briggs sitting opposite him with his work-reddened hand folded in his lap and looking warily at Conklin.