

THE COMPUTER PROGRAMMER

by Diana Petrova

translated from the Bulgarian by Ekaterina Petrova

The number of clients I had was growing, and so were my apprehensions about how I was going to manage.

“Hello,” the Computer Programmer said and took off his jacket, which looked like an oversized piece of kids’ clothing. His red boxers were peeking out over the belt of his jeans. “I’ve come to you with a specific question.”

I felt a sudden urge to explain what the psychotherapist’s job was, and that he was neither a fortune-teller nor a TV game show contestant, which is why he couldn’t be expected to give answers that were either right or wrong.

“And what is your question?”

“Well, look...” he started rubbing his hands on his jeans. “How can I make some friends? Not colleagues, not acquaintances, but friends outside of my professional sphere.”

The simplicity of the question was brutal. We just sat there for several seconds—I tried to identify the internal torment’s complex intricacies underneath his question’s blatant simplicity, while he just worried over how childish it had sounded.

“Do you ever read any applied psychology books?”

“Yes. I’ve read some stuff by Steve Pavlina, if that’s what you mean. He gives tips on how to ask somebody out for lunch and things like that, but that has nothing to do with making friends,” the Programmer sighed.

The effort of saying more than two sentences seemed to exhaust him. I was tempted to conclude he was one of those people who don’t have the vocabulary to talk about their emotions. The kind of person who doesn’t know how to express, let alone discuss his feelings with a stranger. And yet, I refrained from making any conclusions, as that would’ve predetermined the course of things and created expectations on my part. Once the expectations were there, I would try to validate them, and that had no part in good psychotherapeutic practices.

“Pavlina is that famous blogger who’s also a computer programmer, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Yes, you know about him!” his shoulders relaxed and his legs opened up.

“Yes,” I said, while trying to hide my real opinion of the guy, which was that he was useless.

“What do you think about him?”

“What do *you* think?” I felt like I was playing a game of ping-pong.

“He’s good, but he’s not much use in this case.”

A pause followed. I should’ve been prepared for that. I was in a psychotherapeutic situation and I was supposed to be attentive to the person sitting across from me.

“What kind of difficulties do you usually encounter when you try to make friends? Have you even tried?”

“I’ve tried many times.”

“What do you usually do?”

“I chat people up, I invite them out to lunch.”

“And?”

“It doesn’t work.”

“Tell me about the specific steps you take,” I was being merciless.

This guy was probably making at least five times as much money as me. And yet, he was acting like a wimp. I think that was the moment I decided that this was a client worth keeping. He could become my punching bag—I’d quietly compare myself to him and think about how I had the most awesome friends, the hottest chick, and the coolest motorbike, while he didn’t. At the same time though, chills went down my spine. If I continued to entertain such sentiments, perhaps I wasn’t worthy of being a professional psychotherapist.

Shortly after that, a wave of pity for the guy swept over me. Back in school, he’d probably been a straight-A student, or worse—a nondescript nerd who hadn’t dared to stand out as a straight-A student. Perhaps he’d gotten bullied, kicked around, spat at, and made fun of, but ever since, instead of breaking windows or raping girls, he’d tried to remain as inoffensively normal as possible. What had he done to deserve such hostility from me? And, God damn it, what had he done to deserve my pity?! I uncrossed my legs and leaned on my elbows. The Programmer stayed silent.

“Look, this isn’t going to work unless you start talking. I need to know what you’re feeling. I can’t help you otherwise.”

“Yes, of course, I’ll try,” he said and his face strained.

I listened to him, as he recounted all his pathetic attempts to get people to like him. According to him, they either took him for “a fag” or “a sissy,” and they excluded him from their little cliques.

“So, how do you feel now?” I hated that question because it was so misleading. It usually got clients to start spewing out superlatives about the session they’d just attended before getting the chance to really evaluate it. But I was itching to ask anyway—I needed to hear his praise.

“The same as before,” he said and smiled. “Nothing’s changed yet.”

His words stung me. Not just because they didn’t meet my expectations, but also because I’d actually made an effort.

“That’s good,” I said, though I actually meant the opposite. If he was still feeling the same as before, then the real reason for his unhappiness and his inability to socialize outside of his work environment was pretty far removed from what he’d shared with me. “For next time, I’d like you to write down some of your dreams. After getting into therapy, you might start dreaming more intensely,” I said, and smiled in return.

There was a real possibility he would never come back. I would eventually find out that this possibility existed in regard to all my clients, since the things they said, the things they felt, and the things they did were sometimes completely at odds with one another. Those who needed therapy the most were the most inconsistent. So, it turned out that, besides keeping the good of my clients in mind, I also had to worry about ways of encouraging them to come back.

Session Two

“Did you bring a dream today?”

“I didn’t dream of anything,” the Programmer rubbed his hands on his pants.

“We can’t make the unconscious speak to us according to a schedule.”

“Actually, I’d like to talk a little bit more about my job today.”

“Hmm . . . I thought you wanted to talk about your relationships with the people around you.”

“I did, but today I’m not in the mood at all.”

“Of course. The important thing is to talk about whatever’s currently on your mind, sir.”

“I’d like to be a little less formal. Can we switch to a first-name basis, if you don’t mind?”

“I don’t.”

“So, in my free time, I do programming for a website that deals with online gambling. It’s a project I started with a couple of friends . . . but it weighs heavily on my conscience.”

“What does?”

“That so many people completely miss the point of gambling . . . and that it’s totally senseless . . . and that it just eats up their savings in no time.”

“And how does that concern you?”

“Well,” he continued, “we can manipulate the games to our advantages. The whole damn thing is totally unregulated.”

“You’d want it to be regulated?”

“Well, as weird as it may sound, I would,” he said, raising his voice.

“Why’s that?” I raised my eyebrows.

“Because if it were, I wouldn’t feel as bad about it as I do now,” he said with an expression that gave away his irritation with having to state the obvious.

“Since it makes you feel guilty, have you considered putting an end to your involvement with the website?”

“Yes, of course. That’s precisely why they think I’m a fool. Besides, I’ve already put work into it, but I still wish my money was going to . . .”

“A good cause?”

“Yes,” his face flushed.

“You don’t need to be ashamed of this. You should be proud, actually. Let me repeat, you don’t have to feel badly. I’m familiar with the issue of gambling from a psychological point of you. You might be curious to hear about that.”

“What difference would it make?”

“I suppose it might take you a step closer to getting rid of the guilt.”

“Hmm,” he said, shrugging his shoulders.

“It would allow you to make friends faster,” I put my last card on the table.

His face lit up, which I took as a sign to go on.

“Gambling, in the most general terms, is a way for people to make a break with reality.”

“So?”

“So,” I made an effort to follow own thought, “to some people, immersing themselves in this imaginary world is a kind of escape. Try to imagine that gambling may be a way for them to demonstrate their intellectual superiority over the other players, or—to go even further—over the creators of the game. So, in some players, the game might give rise to an unsuspected thirst for revenge, aggression, or even cruelty.”

“Is that all?”

“Not at all,” I said, taking a breath. “Many of these people need a way to get rid of their excess energy, or they simply like following the dynamics of the game. Others might get excited by the whole veiled secrecy and think of the game as a kind of . . . ,” I was looking for the right word, “. . . social drug.”

“And so, what?”

“Do you think it’s logical for you to feel guilty, just because some people have the kind of needs that cause them to use gambling as a vessel, into which they pour their inferiority complex? What I mean is, gambling will exist whether you’re part of it or not.”

“It might not be logical for me to feel guilty,” he began cautiously. “But I do anyway.”

I realized I’d made a mistake. You simply couldn’t prove a client wrong by making inferences.

“Do you remember when you first started feeling guilty?”

The Programmer crossed his legs and knitted his eyebrows together.

“No.”

Then came a pause.

“Are you able to connect the feeling to a particular event?”

“Well . . . I don’t really know. I can think of one. Some people from my building once blamed for flooding their apartment. We got into an argument . . . I tried to talk to them rationally, but to no avail. In the end, it turned out that it wasn’t me, but the next-door neighbor who was having some trouble with a pipe in his own apartment. Though it took us a while to figure that out . . .”

“And what happened afterward?”

“That’s about the same time that my partners and I were meeting and trying to come up with ways of increasing visits to the website. Look, this has nothing to do with it,” he said and sucked some air in through his teeth.

“Let’s not jump ahead of ourselves,” I said, thinking I might be onto something. What if he’d been unjustly accused, then tried to add to the accusations himself, and finally—after finding nothing for which to blame himself—he’d gotten into the gambling websites? My train of thought led me to consider his parents. I immediately imagined a father who constantly punished and blamed him undeservedly, while the Programmer himself finished off what the father had started.

I began asking him about his relation to his parents, but before I knew it, the session was over. I definitely thought this could have something to do with his inability to communicate with other people. If he was feeling guilty or punished by the world, the only way he could connect to the world was through that guilt. And when he tried to enter it by other means, he simply didn’t know how to do it.

I wanted to stop and rewind, as I’d been too hasty in coming up with a theory about the case. I went out and lit a cigarette. It was almost evening. The schoolyard was illuminated by a floodlight. The lights were on in several of the rooms, but most of them were dark.

As I watched them, I admitted to myself that I knew nothing about the Programmer.

Session Three

The Programmer scowled and kept on his jacket, even though it was warm in the room. I wondered what he would start talking about this time—his issues with making friends or the online gambling program. He sat down in the armchair, but his whole body radiated such tension that one would think he was getting ready to run off at any moment.

“So, today, I’m working on this code for one of our projects . . . and this guy comes in for an interview. At the same time, one of my co-workers announces that some other guy

from a different team did such a crappy job with the code that we now have to go through the whole thing again and fix his mess.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Well, so . . . I wanted to show off in front of the guy who was there for the interview. So, I said, ‘Send over the buggy codes to me, I’ll fix them.’ I don’t know why I even gave a damn about the whole thing, since I was probably never going to see that guy again . . . Then they asked him into the conference room and the whole show was over. But I’d already promised to fix the damn code, so I was stuck with it. On top of everything else, just to prove I’d really meant it, I sent out an e-mail to the guy who’d made the code in the first place, with a copy to everyone else, and attached a file with all his mistakes highlighted in yellow. I just lose my shit sometimes. I still don’t know how I got myself into the whole thing. I had no intention of . . . it’s just that when I saw the guy sitting on the couch, I kind of lost it.”

“He was somebody you didn’t know, is that correct?” I asked.

“Yes, he was a total stranger.”

“And how did he look at you?”

“I don’t know, maybe he was a little suspicious.”

“Does that mean you wanted to prove that he had no reason to look at you with suspicion?”

“Something like that.”

“We might say that your behavior was a sign of a lack of confidence. Did you manage to fix the code?”

“Of course, I think I’m good at my job, but . . .”

“ . . . you lack self-confidence. Perhaps it’s time you told me a little about your family . . .”

“My family, you say . . . What about it—my father’s always right and my mother’s always on his side. Sometimes to me, they seem like a single entity.”

“You don’t seem happy about that.”

“Well, I’m not. There’s something sketchy about the whole thing. She’s his servant.”

“Servant to what?”

“What do you mean ‘to what’? She’s a servant to him!”

“ . . . and perhaps she’s servicing his world.”

“Yes! Well said.”

That’s when I hit a wall. He had a healthy dissatisfaction with his family situation. Therefore, I couldn’t get anything more out of that. Besides, I felt no tension in him. I made a pause.

“I wonder if you could remember something unpleasant you’ve done in the past? It seems like your aggressive behavior, which you probably use in an effort to get approval, the guilt you felt last time, as well as the problems you have with making friends—all that might be connected precisely to something like that.”

This time, I immediately knew I was spot on. I could feel the warm pain, as it evaporated from his body through each and every pore of his skin. The more I said in that direction, the more intense the pain got.

“I can’t think of anything,” the Programmer said quickly and fixed his eyes to the floor.

It would be obvious to anyone who ever as much as dabbled in psychotherapy that he was lying.

“Look, you’re not telling me everything,” I switched gears.

We looked at each other for a while. His upper lip quivered ever so slightly. I leaned forward and wrinkled my forehead expectantly.

“Well . . . there is something that nobody knows about. You’re under oath, right?”

Bingo!

“Yes, of course. Nothing from our sessions ever leaves the room, you can be sure of that.”

“I had this friend in the past, a girl. Not a girlfriend, we were just nine or ten. We used to roam the neighborhood together and get into mischief . . . ,” the Programmer signed.

“Aha,” I raised my voice.

“Well . . . it’s not exactly an easy story to tell. Once, I remember, it was in the early evening, and this maniac got a hold of us. He dragged us into a basement and ordered us to

get undressed. He made us stand in a spotlight and started setting up his camera to take pictures of us. As he leaned over, I squeezed through his legs and ran away. I went home and said nothing to my parents. Over the next few days, they looked high and low for my friend. But I stayed silent, because I didn't want them to think I was a coward."

The Programmer was now rubbing his hands on his jeans with such speed that one would think he was rubbing a sore spot.

"What happened to the girl?"

"They eventually found her dead body in the basement. They questioned me afterward, since they knew we used to be inseparable, but I denied that we'd been together. I don't know how they never realized I was lying. Later, I overheard people talking in front of my apartment building, saying she'd been raped and had only died three days later. That pervert had kept her there with no food and no water."

The Programmer's lips were twisted and he was still not making eye contact. His face was the perfect illustration of a classic case of childhood guilt. It sounded almost a little too perfectly set up.

"Look, I guess you also realize it yourself, but you tend to feel guilty in situations that make you feel similarly to how you felt as a result of that incident. Back then, you could've done something, but you didn't, and now—in the case of the gambling website, things are similar. Have there been instances where you felt unworthy and undeserving of people's attention?"

"Yes, many times!"

"You probably understand that the reasons for this are rooted in the past, which you still haven't worked through," I repeated this, in order to give him enough time to process it. Then, I added, "You know, it's a real miracle it hasn't made you sick by now!"

"If you say so . . .," the Programmer uttered.

My client was facing the most significant issues of his entire life. And even though I was feeling everything the same way he was, I was also getting bored. His problem was just so pedestrian.

I had no choice. In order to continue being interested in his therapy, I had to let myself be cruel to him. As Nietzsche put it, without cruelty there is no festival. Whenever I saw somebody who was weak, I had the urge to crush him and make him pay for his weakness. I

don't know why I did that, but I did it anyway—perhaps this was something I needed to discuss with my own psychotherapist.

“Let's leave the analysis for another time. I'd like to give you a piece of advice, which is usually quite inadmissible in psychotherapeutic practices. Go with your urge to do good—do it in the name of a cause, or for some old relative. Doing good is sometimes more helpful to those who do it, rather than to those it's done for. And something else—don't do good secretly. In some cases, that might have its advantages, but not in yours. You need to show the world the kind of person you are, you need to do the good deeds your heart is telling you to do, and you need to be able to receive gratitude for them.”

“But she's dead! And nobody knows I was there,” the Programmer was almost screaming.

He was wiping his eyes with his sleeves and I could see his fingers were trembling.

“You were just a kid. You were scared and alone—you're not the one to blame for her death, the rapist is.”

“If I'd spoken up, if I'd told my parents . . . perhaps she'd still be alive,” his lips were twisting frightfully now. His eyes darkened and his face flushed. It even made me nervous. Then, very slowly, while looking the Programmer in the eyes, I said:

“You must forgive yourself. Why don't you start by asking for forgiveness from those you think should forgive you?”

“You mean her parents?”

“Yes.”

“No,” he kept shaking his head. “They'd never forgive me. I don't even know if they're still alive.”

“Have you tried going to see them?”

“I went up to their house so many times. But I couldn't get myself to knock on their door. And now it's too late.”

“It isn't. I think you're only working up the courage now. You're not that scared little kid anymore. You're also a victim of that crime.”

“What are you saying? It's been twenty years.”

“Look, look at yourself actually. This has poisoned your life and continues to poison it.”

“That’s true, but I deserve it,” he said, and pressed his lips together.

“No one deserves to be his own prisoner.”

“What do you know? You just sit here in your stupid office and you don’t even know anything about the outside world,” the Programmer said, but there was no trace of malice or bitterness in his words. He was simply making a statement.

“I won’t even try to justify the actions of a mere kid, whom you never managed to leave behind and still carry within you every day. Yes, nothing can change the past—even if her parents forgive you and in this way make it possible for you to start forgiving yourself. Nothing will change if you continue living the same way as you’ve lived until now, either—without anyone else knowing about this fatal incident. But if you can manage to understand that little boy who found the strength to save his own life that day, and who suffered for his friend from the bottom of his heart, you will forgive him. You won’t change the past,” I repeated, then paused, “the only thing you can change is your future.”

The Programmer was silent for a long time before he started to speak.

“I’ll try,” he said, seeming completely crushed.

We ended the session quietly and in a manly way, somehow—without any loud proclamations or the need for hugs. The Programmer looked yellow and wrinkled, like a squeezed out lemon. The scariest part was yet to come.