

1st Place: "Redemption" by Christina Salidas



Kate Maslow loved her job. She was good at it and she knew it, she could *feel* it. Word spread quickly that she was the therapist to see to help you deep dive into your neuroses and trauma and come out the other side transformed. Kate was authentic, sincere and skilled and created such a safe space even the most unyielding and difficult clients felt secure.

Her waiting list for an appointment was ever growing and Kate felt on top of the world. She recently had signed a lease for a new office space and it was perfect. The best part was that her office was in a building that had previously been recording studios, so each office was

sound proof. Gone was the need for those ubiquitous sound machines every therapist had outside their door to protect client privacy. Kate was assured by the building manager that no sound could travel through her office walls. She hoped that this added layer of privacy would make her clients feel even more safe.

Micheal was her next client and he was right on time, per usual. He was a quiet man and seemingly meek even though he had an imposing frame. This would be their third session together and Kate was hoping he would divulge a little more instead of his typical skirting around painful subjects. In his last session, Micheal made a point to ask about the soundproof office, so Kate was hopeful he felt safe.

After an exchange of pleasantries Kate said, "All right Micheal, tell me what's been going on in your life. What brings you in today?"

"I wanted to maybe talk about something that I feel really conflicted about. But I don't know..." His eyes darted around anxiously.

“ I see you're feeling nervous,” Kate said kindly, “and that’s ok. This is a safe space and I’m not here to judge you...” Before she could speak further Micheal abruptly stood up and started to pace, his hands grabbing his head, beads of sweat appeared on his brow.

His words came out in a torrential rush “ I eat people, ok? I don’t want to but it’s like I have to and I can’t help it, I...eat ...people.”

The words lingered in the still air. Kate could feel the blood drain from her face and her mouth felt oddly dry. Her heart was beating so fast in that quiet room. “I’m sorry, what..what?” Her throat constricted; her words came out in a near whisper.

Micheal plopped back down on the sofa, he seemed to stare right past Kate as he spoke. His voice became monotone and she thought she saw saliva pooling at the corner of his mouth.

“I get...so hungry, ya know? It’s like a strange kind of hunger that can only be satisfied by one thing. Maybe it’s the texture, the taste...I, I don’t know...it’s hard to come by...” His eyes locked back on Kate. “Sometimes opportunities present themselves...”

Oh my God, Kate thought, is this it? Am I going to die? She could feel her face start to go cold and numb and for a brief second her terror seemed to render her completely immobile, even her breath was imperceptible.

Suddenly, she remembered something he had said. **“Conflicted”**

Could she use his cognitive dissonance and her own skills to save herself? Clutching her pen tightly to stop her trembling hands, Kate swallowed hard and implored, “Micheal, please..... let me try to help you.”

He leaned in close and winked, “Well now, I was hoping you would, Kate.”

