

Jonathan opens the door to his waiting room, to greet the GROUP THERAPY PATIENTS he will be taking over from his supervisor DR. OTTO HOFFMAN, who at age 69, is retiring. The members eye him reticently.

SUPERIMPOSE "Session 1: Tuesday"

Jonathan offers a wan smile to break the ice, then smiles more fully.

JONATHAN

Hello everyone. Please come in.

As the group files through the open doorway, a smattering of GREETINGS ensue. Entering are:

- MELISSA SHEPHARD (35), a compassionate ER nurse currently separated from her husband, the heart of the group
- JERRELL QUALLEY (28), a bodybuilder with body dysmorphic disorder and repressed homosexual tendencies
- RICHARD BALLAST (50), a depressed, overweight man with a mid-life crisis

MELISSA

(smiles)

Hello.

JERRELL

(sing songy)

Hey-lo.

RICHARD

(nods)

Doc.

Next are:

- JOANIE ALTHROP (22), a beautiful, sensitive, shy blonde secretary with borderline personality disorder
- ADAM DEBAR (19), a marijuana-dependent college dropout with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- NADINE BALLAST (48), the bullying, physically and verbally abusive wife of Richard

As they pass Jonathan at the doorway, their personalities begin to emerge: Joanie bats her eyelashes, Adam enters in a fairly rapid, staccato motion, and Nadine shuffles brusquely past. Jonathan appears to be brought to alert attention by Joanie. Last are:

- MARTIN KISSLING (37), a sadistic surgeon with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)
- ANTHONY SELVAGGI (43), a creatively stifled tenured professor of medieval literature
- TEMPESTT SIMMONS (33), a lesbian activist with manic-depressive disorder, infatuated with Joanie

Martin is first to speak. He is oily, arrogant, impeccably groomed.

MARTIN

Quite a wait we've had.

JONATHAN

Oh? Our appointment is for 6:30?

MARTIN

I have 6:40.

Patients take seats in the room.

TEMPESTT

You're fast again, Martin.

ANTHONY

(to Martin)

Anything to up your \$350 per hour fee, right? You should see what I take home.

MARTIN

I've told you before, I have no interest in what you take home, Tony.

ANTHONY

It's Anthony. I've told you before.

The men stand with warring postures.

JONATHAN

(to both)

All right. Let's-- sit down.

Everyone is positioned on two curved couches that create a kind of semi-circle, like greeting half moons. Jonathan's chair is a comfortable brown leather, well worn, set at a mid-point in clear view of the group members. Jonathan is last to sit.

JONATHAN

(to everyone)

I hope you found the new location all right?

MELISSA

(warmly)

It's close to where we were before --on Durham Road?

JONATHAN

Good. So why don't we get started. To begin, do any of you have questions for me?

SILENCE, as a few heads turn to others.

JONATHAN

I know this is a change for you. Dr. Hoffman has sent some very positive notes to me about all of you. About the progress you've made. I realize you've been together as a group for four weeks now--

MELISSA

--Actually, it's been six weeks, Dr. Soma.

JONATHAN

Please, call me Jonathan. A month and a half then, is that right? Once weekly?

MELISSA

Uh-huh.

JONATHAN

It seems I have some catching up to do. You're--

MELISSA

Melissa.

JONATHAN

Melissa. Perhaps you can fill me in. How would you say things have been going so far?

MELISSA

To tell you the truth Dr. Soma--

JONATHAN

Jonathan.

MELISSA

Jonathan.

JONATHAN

We're all equals here.

Adam SNORTS in disbelief.

JONATHAN

You don't think so...
(quick glance at notes)
Adam?

ADAM

Stellar--
(throws up his hands)
Revolutionary.

[NOTE: Adam's ADHD makes him shift awkwardly and haphazardly at times. His speech is occasionally abrupt, and at times rapid. He's often scattered.]

TEMPESTT

Hey, that word had meaning once upon a time, son. Don't defile the word.

[NOTE: Tempestt's energy is at a somewhat different pace than Adam's, due to her manic nature. She is more high-strung, and at times grandiose. When the two argue, it's like two bouncing ping pong balls coming off a different "spin."]

ADAM

Sorry to get into your area.

TEMPESTT

I wish you would get into my area. But it would require a moratorium on smokable hemp. You know, first clear the head. Then change the world.

ADAM

And what will clear my head of all the self-righteous crap I have to listen to from you every week?

TEMPESTT

(deadpan)

Hempseed oil. Only hemp I believe in, for the Omega 3s. It'll keep those brain cells lubricated.

She flicks his head lightly. A few smirks go around the room.

MELISSA

Can I continue, please?

JONATHAN

Yes, of course.

(after a glance at notes)

Adam, Tempestt, I've noted you've raised some-- concerns.

(to Melissa)

Please go ahead.

MELISSA

Well, I was about to say that not much has been productive, at least for me. And sorry, but

(gestures to Adam and Tempestt)

this is why. I think there's so much nonsense that goes on in this room-- it's such a hodge podge week to week-- that I don't think we're getting anywhere. I can't believe you've had a good progress report. What would a bad one look like?

JONATHAN

That's a common complaint among patients in treatment. Things are not happening fast enough, insurance is reaching a "cap," so there's a real urgency to want results right away. But the truth is these are complex issues that take time to resolve. And because you're in a group setting, it's a different dynamic than if you were treated individually.

JOANIE

(painfully shy)

But you do offer individual treatment?

[NOTE: There is something slightly vague and vacant about Joanie's presence, as if she'd disintegrate in a strong wind.]

JONATHAN

Yes--

He checks his notes for her name.

JOANIE

Joanie.

JONATHAN

(gently)

Yes, Joanie. In fact, many patients choose to have both private and group sessions on a weekly basis. If you would like private time, we can schedule it.

(to room)

That goes for all of you.

MARTIN

Oh, great. Private and group sessions? I resolve "issues" in a matter of hours. Maybe you guys don't know what you're doing. I'd like to see your clinicals.

JONATHAN

In fact, there was an article in
New England Journal of Medicine
just last month. About the benefits
of dovetailing both--

MARTIN

(sarcastic)

--oh, really--

JONATHAN

--yes, and the necessity of
adequate treatment duration to
prevent relapse. I'll put it in
the waiting room for you.

MARTIN

(contemptuous)

I get it at the office.

JONATHAN

Tell me Martin, if you're such a
skeptic, what brought you here?

MARTIN

(shrugs it off)

Lawsuit. Long story.

JONATHAN

I'll be interested to hear it.

NADINE

(to Martin)

Hah! Mr. Slick.

JONATHAN

Excuse me--

NADINE

Nadine.

JONATHAN

Nadine.

RICHARD

Mark my words, doc. Pretty soon
she'll be insisting on "Madame
Ballast."

JONATHAN

We don't use last names here.

RICHARD

Oh. Right.

NADINE

(to Richard)

What makes you think I want to hear myself associated with your ridiculous last name? Believe me, I'm sorry I ever took it. Ballast.

(to Jonathan)

Makes me feel like a lead weight, and that's his area.

With this, Nadine humiliates her husband by whacking his protruding stomach with the back of her hand, fairly hard, not a light tap. It appears off-handed, but it's more of a punch, to assert her "power," and to challenge Jonathan. It's enough to make several patients recoil as they're taken aback. Richard moves to protect his body, then decides to get up and sit elsewhere. Nadine flushes with anger at him from moving away from her.

JONATHAN

Nadine, I can't allow physical acts like that in this room. It's inappropriate.

NADINE

Oh, I was just kidding.

JERRELL

No, you weren't. It's repugnant.

[NOTE: Though Jerrell is imposing with all his body mass, there is something very 12-year-old girlish about him.]

NADINE

You're repugnant.

JERRELL

You want to take it outside? Hey, I'll hit a woman.

TEMPESTT
(a jibe to break the tension)
Metaphorically speaking.

JERRELL
What?

TEMPESTT
You'll hit one, but you won't "tap"
one. So, metaphor.

ANTHONY
(studious)
Technically, I don't think that's a
metaphor--

JERRELL
(to Tempestt)
Oh, have you been following me
outside the office? You know this
for a fact do you?

Jonathan shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

JOANIE
(near tears)
Everyone stop! Jonathan asked
if we had questions for him, and
Melissa was just starting to
tell him about us. Please! This is
our first session! You're showing
him the absolute worst about us
all. He might leave before we
begin!

Jonathan leans towards Joanie.

JONATHAN
It's okay, Joanie. This is how
things sometimes go--

He takes a moment to reflect on his impression of her, then he
shifts his focus back to the group.

JONATHAN

I'll tell you what. Why don't we all make today-- the first day, as Joanie says. Clean slate. Let's just go around the room and each of you-- tell us the main issue or concern you have that you'd like to focus on going forward. We'll save group responses for later, so everyone, no comments for now. And no fear of repudiation. You're all on a first-name-only basis, and you've signed confidentiality agreements to protect the shared information we discuss here. So, no fear. Let's get down to it.

(beat, glance at notes)

Richard, why don't we start with you.