

THE DOCTOR-PATIENT-FAMILY RELATIONSHIP

SUMMARY: "Fetishes" Richard Selzer, former Yale University surgeon and professor, is a widely recognized essayist and short story writer who has received many awards for his fiction, including a National Magazine Award, a Pushcart Prize, and a Guggenheim fellowship. In this story, a middle-aged woman faces a total hysterectomy, but her primary concern is whether her anthropologist-husband Leonard will discover as a result of the surgery that she wears dentures, a secret she has successfully kept from him for fifteen years. This secret comes to symbolize Audrey's ability to retain some control over her own life and to keep some semblance of dignity. She appeals variously to her physicians and family members to assist her, but to no avail. Finally, a sympathetic resident honors her request and receives a gift of healing in return.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Audrey attempt to triangulate her physicians to defuse potential conflict between her and her husband?
2. Why might Violet (Audrey's sister) form a coalition with Audrey's physicians against her sister?
3. What are aspects of a successful therapeutic alliance that are modeled in the unfolding relationship among Audrey, Dr. Bhimjee, and Leonard?

TRIANGULATION ISSUES

1. Dyadic enmeshment: husband unwittingly initially pairs with the concept of all-knowing, all-powerful doctors to the exclusion of the patient's (his wife's) wishes
2. Illicit coalition: Violet and Audrey's physicians form an illicit coalition scapegoating the patient
3. Therapeutic alliance: By the end of the story, Dr. Bhimjee, Audrey, and Leonard are functioning as part of a constructive therapeutic alliance