



# **Slow Provocation**

**A Novel**

**Pam Stavropoulos**



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*Now nothing can be human unless it is  
paradoxical.*

Joel Kovel



# SYNOPSIS

*'It's hard to find people you can talk to about this kind of stuff'.*

She is being consulted in her professional capacity, but his words resonate at a personal level as well. Holly Ladall is a therapist and mother of a young son. She is also increasingly unsettled by a combination of things, from aspects of her family history to the unfolding of national and global events.

Needy client, fully integrated therapist. Who believed that anymore? She knows the importance of examining her own responses. But it is also easy to deflect from the questions they raise. And as much as she is trying not to, maybe that is what she has started to do.

In this confronting novel, diverse contexts collide. While believing she can handle the escalating pressure, Holly finds herself struggling in unforeseen ways. Can she assist Grant and Aaron, two clients who pose stark and contrasting challenges? Is Sophie, her friend and employee, trapped in a traumatic re-enactment? Are there senses in which she herself might be? Which is worse - not to know yourself, or to be revealed in all your complexity?

Against the wider terrain of 9/11 and polarised responses to 'the refugee crisis', personal dynamics intersect with dilemmas of abuse, sadomasochistic sex and social justice – to startling effect.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

*Slow Provocation is a work of fiction. While transgressive at some levels, it seeks to engage responsibly with the intersecting issues it raises. These include interpersonal and political inequality, sexual expression, traumatic re-enactment, and psychotherapy (for which self-awareness and ongoing self-scrutiny are essential prerequisites of reflective and ethical practice). In this context, distinction is drawn - as it clearly needs to be - between consensual nonconventional sexual activity which is freely engaged in, and that which is fuelled by unresolved and often early-life trauma (for which specialised and potentially long-term counselling is indicated). The need for this distinction is clear but the means of arriving at it may not be. The stakes of discerning and negotiating the boundary between the two is one of several components of the narrative drive.*

# 1

Midday already. Grant from Probation and Parole will be here any minute.  
*And I'm not ready for him.*

But then I'm never really ready for Grant. And I can't blame that, although I sometimes try, on the distinctive challenges of my profession. He's challenging in more ways than the obvious (and there are plenty of those to start with).

The terms of his probation are that he attends weekly sessions with me, his psychotherapist. But his personal motivation for coming, if any, is ambiguous. In advance of his first visit, his Probation Officer told me that Grant believed himself too intelligent for therapy. Combined with the nature of his offence (wilful exposure, of all things) that was hardly an auspicious note on which to begin.

There was more of course. But that didn't surface until later. I'd built up a mental picture of him in advance, as you do. Give or take a few details (he lacked the anticipated tattoo) his

physical demeanour roughly approximated it. Heavy-set, shaved head, diffident posture. But his intellect was as sharp as his nose stud; Grant interrogated *everything*.

That is part of his problem. Or at least, the rationalisations that come with it. And which fortunately give me something to work with. Here my academic (mis)experience serves me well; I know at first hand the complicities of the mind. But I always feel close to being out of my depth with Grant. There is a sardonic side to him which, with fluctuating amusement and alarm, I can sometimes feel myself responding to.

The sound of the door handle, his step in the hall.

‘Hey Doctor’.

He always greets me this way. Despite, or because, of its inaccuracy. Maybe he feels it gives him an edge. His tone, in that habitual salutation, has an element of deference as well as contempt. Resisting the temptation to try to

prioritise the two is the only way I can continue to work with him.

‘Hi Grant. Take a seat. I’ll just be a minute’.

He sits in the reception area. Maybe the thought that I am disorganised is only in my mind and not in his. After six sessions, I still feel vaguely fraudulent in his presence. Or at least more fraudulent than usual.

That also has to do with the contrast between our respective worlds. His is of impulse and action; mine is more sedentary than is probably healthy either. I could never imagine Grant recording anything on paper or computer screen. The labyrinthine workings of his mind are deployed in more immediate ways. It is as if he thinks all can be enacted, and consequences are of secondary consideration. Though that appals me in obvious respects, it intrigues me as well.

‘So how’s it going?’

An elliptical smile as he saunters in, drapes his heavy leather motorcycle jacket on the back of a chair, and eases himself into another.

The first time he entered my little consulting room he had expressed surprise at the absence of a couch (*'Aren't I meant to lie down?'*) We had exchanged normalising remarks, or as normalising as possible in the somewhat surreal circumstances. And which had involved exchange as to the imagined impression we'd had of the other. When I told him I had anticipated a tattoo, he had said, deadpan, *'How do you know I haven't one?'*

Some kind of rapport between us had ignited with that retort. But it always needed to be managed carefully, and I am always on my mettle with him.

*'Not so bad, not so good'*.

An equivocal beginning. But Grant is articulate when he chooses to be and now is one of those times. He tells me more than I want or need to

know about his week (and mine is a profession in which details are important).

I usually let him make the running. Today he is loquacious. And quietly resistant – as always – to the few interventions I make. The hour flies by, as with him it tends to do.

‘Well, that’s it for today Grant’.

Initially critical of strict time-limits, I have since come to swear by them.

‘See you next week Doctor’.

*Doctor, doctor. Gimme a break.*

An attempt to get under my skin. But the sense of camaraderie is there as well, along with the ambivalence about female authority that is so clear it scarcely needs noting. Except that it is new slants on the obvious that are so important in my field. And often so damn elusive.

Aside from the effect on my finances (which is hardly an `aside' in the world in which we live) I like it when I'm not occupied all day. My hard-won self-insight means I am no longer tempted to fill spare time with all the things that could claim it, were I to allow them to. Admin tasks are ongoing. But today they can be deferred a little longer. Immersion in the outside air is what draws me now. And it's luxurious to be able to still my critical inner voice which has been insistent for so long.

*What would my life have become had I not been able to achieve that ability?*

Even on a day as humid as this one I shudder at the thought. And hope, as I always do, for the skill to foster that ability in my clients.

Many already have it. Conversely, some need to develop it. *The wisdom to know the difference.* I think of Grant as I lock my office door. As I emerge into the sensuous immediacy of the day.

*Doctor, doctor.*

How did it go? *Give me the news. I've got a bad case of loving you.*

Love in all its guises. The search for it, and the need to pull away. Needs for connection, but also for solitude.

*It's a fine balance, isn't it?* I recall the words of Ned, one of my counselling teachers. *And don't assume people are the same in how they manage it.* I hadn't assumed that. Or at least not that I was aware of. I who (thought I) assumed little.

Becoming aware of what we take for granted had been one of our first exercises in class. And in a neat illustration of the point, it had been more difficult for some of us than for others. It had taken me months to approach such seemingly simple directives without internally critiquing them (*a point of commonality with Grant?*) And longer to accept that they might prompt valuable self-knowledge.

Taking little at face value had served me well up to a point. But wasn't one of the costs an

inability to process certain kinds of experience at all? Having seen myself as receptive in most registers, that possibility had not been palatable to me. Eventually I could concede it. Along with recognition of the losses, as well as benefits, I'd sustained as a result.

With an orientation like mine, how could I not be fascinated by the workings of self-sabotage? In fact I'd wanted to specialise in it. Before realising that this desire, too, showed the legacy of patterns which were not necessarily productive.

*It's important to stay open to the gamut of challenges people face (Ned's advice at graduation). Attuning to self-sabotage is important but it's not the only focus you need to hone. Especially when - his grin had precluded my taking offence - you're already good at it.*

'Well thank you very much'.

I could roll with those punches.

`Don't mention it'.

I owed Ned a lot. He'd been my favourite instructor. And our successful mediation of the current between us had assisted my confidence in my ability to do the work in which, at the early midlife point, I finally realised I had always been interested.

*How obtuse can a supposedly intelligent person be?* Another area of interest – the strange gratifications of endlessly deferring what you really want to do.

`See you at an addictions conference or something'.

`Yeah. See you'.

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So how am I going to spend the afternoon?

I feel the urge to swim. The heat is so intense the air shimmers. But my personal thermostat had long been hotter, rivalling anything the mercury could offer.

*How long had I lived on a slow burn, imploded energy dancing in me like a caged animal?*

Some states become so familiar they register as the norm. Which is why it's so good to know – and *feel!* – that personal change is possible.

As if on cue, the weather changes as well. A light breeze becomes more insistent. It ruffles the surface of the pool I'm passing (not optimal, now, to stop for a swim). By the time I reach the first set of traffic lights, large raindrops are falling. The kind that land with force. And which splash further drops in their wake.

*The rains came* (isn't that the title of an old movie?) After the heat, some relief. Water on the parched earth. Balm for the thirsty spirit. Leaving the windows down, I keep driving. I relish the wetness which is coming in from all sides now; want to park the car so I can give myself up to the cleansing ritual it offers. And do so – a lone figure in a children's park, who has never looked so bedraggled. And who has never felt so free.

Jack should be with me now. His ceaseless requests for me to play with him would finally yield rich dividends. I play with him a lot. But part normal child, part my own particular child, enough is never enough for Jack.

*So can we change who we are; who we've been? Can there really be a new beginning in any significant sense? I've long been a sceptic, but I want to believe it. Maybe it's not too late for a new way of operating, a new way of being in the world. As recently as a year ago, my shackles had seemed to be self-imposed. As if annoying impediments I could simply discard at will.*

Incredible I could ever have thought that way! Albeit assisted by many societal messages. And then a lot that hadn't made sense to me started to feel intelligible. I actually *felt* this, and didn't just 'know' it! From being distant cousins (at least twice removed) thinking and feeling seemed to slot into place. *Like a hand in a glove, like a bolt in a door.*

Something flickers in me that I can't quite identify.

But in some ways it's still early days. Bottom up change processes can't easily be accelerated. *How can I make sense of all the pieces when it's only relatively recently that they have started to cohere?*

Yes, 'the rains came'. Drenched to the skin I am purged anew of old pain. As a child might believe, it is as if this storm has been summoned especially for me.

Hastening to the car, I drive back to my old new life.

## 2

Footfalls on the bare boards of the floor. Dust specks dance in shafts of sunlight. And unexpectedly, a feeling of excitement which won't be rationalised.

*This is the house in which –*

'As you can see, it's been well-maintained'.

*Well-maintained.*

I like that. In its outward appearance the house probably mirrored its occupants.

*The truths which couldn't be told.* The hairline fracture which would have grown (*wouldn't it?*) into an abyss. But the parquet floor had always been polished. And the garden (which her grandfather had tended; it is sadly neglected now) had been immaculate.

'If you look out this window, you can see the remains of the orchard. The original lemon tree's still there'.

The lemon tree. Beautiful, bitter, and emblematic of so much. She recalled faded photos of her grandparents standing under the lemon tree. Her mother had told of gathering its fruit. Many years later, her uncle Alex had cried under that lemon tree. Or so someone had said.

She couldn't remember who. As none of the family had been big on disclosure, that information must have been imparted in an uncharacteristically lax moment. Poor uncle Alex, who had a breakdown. `But', her cousin Bette had said elliptically at their meeting six months ago, `there were others'.

*Which others? What others?*

She knew it was useless to ask. Had felt fortunate to be the recipient of that much. Chinks of light in the darkness. Clues but not keys.

`The previous owners were gardeners too. But it's been a long time'.