

Unspoken Truth

A Memoir of Abuse

By Jeanne Marie Tessier
2009



for children everywhere

“Anyone who has been tortured remains tortured...
Anyone who has suffered torture never again will be
able to be at ease in the world; the abomination of the
annihilation is never extinguished. Faith in humanity,
already cracked by the first slap in the face, then
demolished by torture, is never acquired again.”

Jean Amery, as quoted in Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 25.

Introduction

Awakening

I was a college freshman sitting in a lecture hall with 50 or so other students for an introduction to sociology class. The professor was speaking of cultural taboos. His words caused the ground to shift in my understanding of the world and my own life.

“Taboos in cultures,” he said, “reveal not what is forbidden and not allowed to occur, but rather what is rampant that a culture is seeking to hide or contain.” For example he offered the existence of an apparently universal taboo against incest. What that taboo reveals is that incest is rampant in every human culture and is a behavior about which humans feel conflicted or ashamed. Taboos seek to lessen or disguise problem behaviors. While their intent may be to discourage problem behaviors, what they accomplish is to keep problem behaviors unspoken.

That day, on some deep level I didn't fully understand at the time, my history finally began to make sense. What had happened to me in childhood was unspoken and unspeakable. I had no name for it. I, alone in the world, had this secret story, so dark and implausible that at times I doubted my own sanity to think that it had occurred. That day I learned I was not alone; that day initiated my education for living. I began to understand that the secret story of incest is rampant in the world, as is every other form of sexual exploitation of women and children.

Only in my adult lifetime has the reality of sexual abuse begun to be spoken aloud in U.S. culture. As a result, our society has seen an outpouring in recent years of the stories of those whose secret tortures have finally come to light. Taboos are clearly effective at silencing; if only they worked as well at ending what they silence.

The sexual abuse of children is universal. The sexual abuse of women is universal. Universality doesn't mean that every woman and child is abused, although we're only now beginning to understand how many are. Universality means that these abuses occur in every

culture. Forbidding behaviors, but not speaking of them, in essence declaring them unspeakable, does nothing to root them out.

The only way to change this virulent and terrible aspect of human behavior is to expose it with the light of truth. We need to not only speak the truth, but we need to, seek at deep levels, a way to convey its impact upon those who were abused. We need to tell the truth until such understanding and empathy is attained that humans will do everything in their power to learn and teach better ways of being in the world. As author Pearl Buck once wrote:

“And of what meaning is suffering if it does not teach us, who are strong, to prevent it for others? We are shown what it is; we taste the bitterness, in order to stir us to the will to cast it out of the world. Else this world itself is hell.” Pearl Buck. *Pavilion of Women*, 1946, p. 264.

From a very young age, I was traumatized and victimized by childhood sexual abuse by two members of my family. In my late twenties, God led me to a therapist who saved my life and allowed me, over four years time, to express in words and images what happened to me in, and because of, those traumas. Over many years thereafter, I continued to process and forgive myself and others for what had transpired. Now, as a survivor, I’m sharing these pieces of my story, these images and words, as an attempt to tell the truth and what I can to cast out the sexual abuse of children from the world.

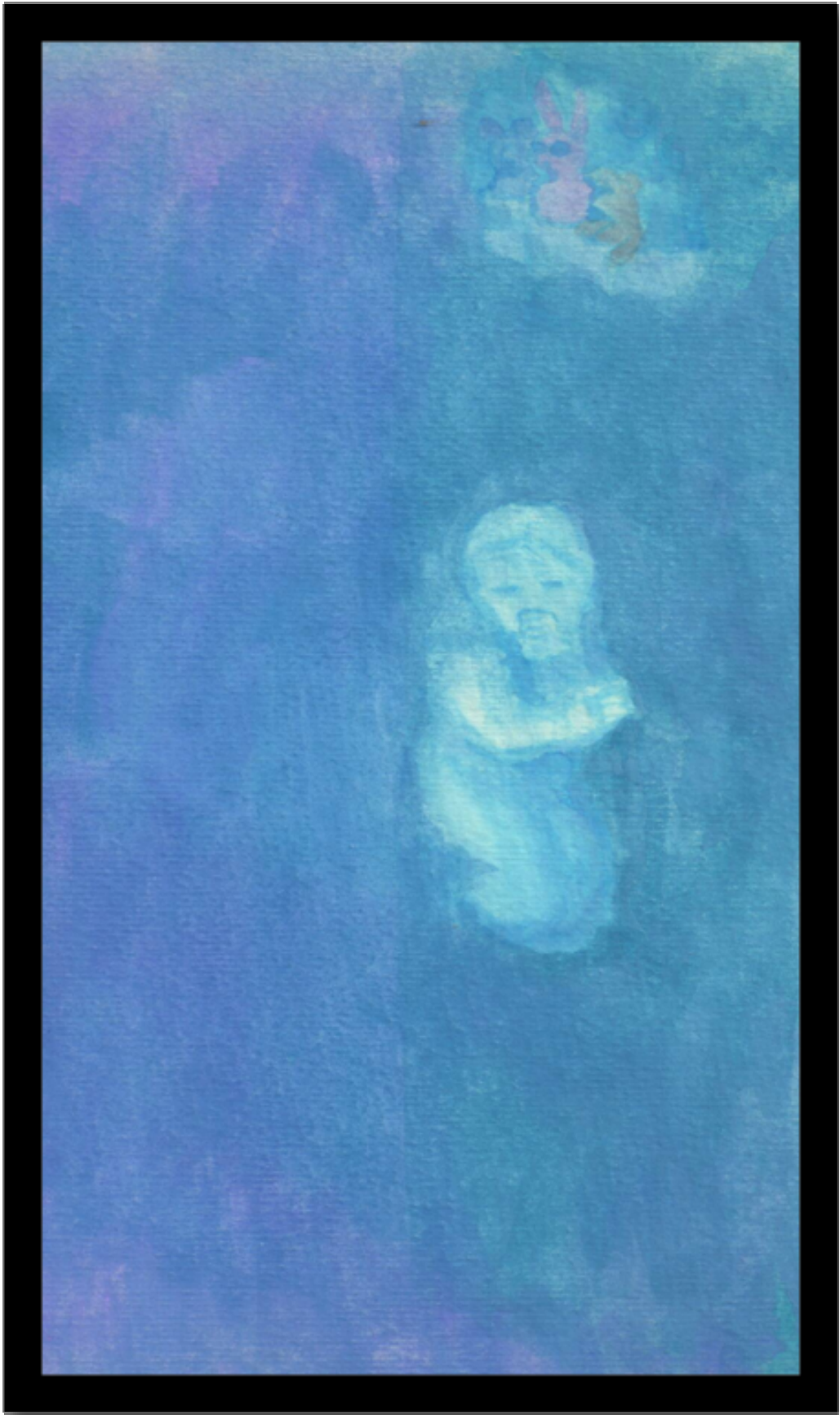
I do not think my story is in any way remarkable. Sadly, I believe it is quite ordinary. There are important individual elements to every survivor’s story. What I offer here are segments of a long–unspoken truth of one survivor’s story — mine — shared to expose with the light of truth what happens to the so many in our world. Also here you will find information and advocacy of a more general kind for all victims and survivors and all who seek to make the world a better place.

There is a fragmented and broken quality to this story and the way I tell it. My hope is that it somehow conveys the fragmented and broken ways in which survivors of abuse try to make sense of the pieces of their stories. I hope that sharing my experience will help other survivors to speak their own truths, to claim their own stories, and to join together in striving to drive childhood sexual abuse from the world.

I hope the sharing of my truth will bring perpetrators of child sexual abuse face to face with the profound harm they cause, and to profound remorse, from which may come behavioral change.

I hope that all those who stand silently by while the abuse of children is taking place will find the courage to speak the truth that they know and to reach out to rescue those who are being abused. I hope everyone who knows of abuses being perpetrated on children will find ways to stand before those they know are doing harm and to say, "No. Not again. Not anymore."

God bless the child.



Chapter One

We Need a New Story

One of the stories my mother used to tell was that I almost died when I was two months old. “Double pneumonia,” she called it. Only the new wonder drug penicillin saved me. I was in the hospital for several weeks. It was Christmastime.

Knowing what I now know, I wonder if I was born with foreknowledge of the life I’d chosen (or was given — opinions differ), if I arrived — if, perhaps, we all arrive — with a prescient awareness that is present at birth but soon forgotten. I wonder if, seeing what was ahead, my spirit turned and ran, sure that I lacked the strength or will to survive the journey ahead. Maybe such fear and uncertainty is why we forget how it is we came to birth, and why. Or, as my original therapist believed, maybe my lungs were filled with my unshed tears.

Another story Mom told, when I asked, was of my birth. The year she carried me, as she said, was the most miserable year of her life, with a hot and miserable summer that lasted well into fall. Did it occur to her that I might wonder if I was the reason for her misery? But I didn’t wonder, because I was sure I was.

She was reading a novel when she went into labor on that cool night in mid-October. She carried it with her to the hospital. She was so engrossed in the book that she was reluctant to be wheeled into the delivery room without it when I was ready to be born. At 4 A.M., as soon as I was born, she asked to be wheeled back to her room so she could finish her book.

She went on to tell me that when she got back to her room, the sun was rising on a perfect autumn day — brilliant red and orange and yellow leaves ablaze on the trees outside her window and crystal blue sky overhead. “What a beautiful day,” she said. “And then I finished my book and went to sleep.” The morning of my birth was the first of many times, it seems, that my mother forgot about me.



These are the things she told me long ago as I remember them....

She was born in Belfast, Ireland. Her mother died of tuberculosis when my mother was a toddler. Her father was a harsh and demanding man. She had four brothers. She was passed around among other poor relatives in Belfast after her mother died. She was treated like a servant; made to wait until their families finished their meals before she was allowed to eat. She loved school and was good at it, but was too poor to attend beyond elementary school.

She ran away from home at seventeen — from Belfast to London — and lied about her age to become a member of the first British Women's Army Corps during World War II. She and other women were trained to operate searchlights. She met my father at the fence outside her searchlight post one evening. They soon married out of necessity (my older sister). It took more than a year from the time my father came home until Mom was able to join him here in the U.S.

When she crossed the ocean on the Queen Mary in 1946 (a ship filled with other war brides and children), my sister was one and a half and our brother was six. He was a half-brother actually, but it was a good while before I knew that and longer before I understood. His father (if pressed, Mom would tell) "died in a blitz in London." He was "not a kind man." His name was Samuel. Samuel was also my mother's father's name. I was conceived not too long after their arrival in the U.S., and thus began my mother's "most miserable year."

Later, in my young adulthood, Mom occasionally spoke of other aspects of her misery: my father's harsh, judgmental, unwelcoming family; his mother and sister who "treated her like she was trash" and made it clear to her that they believed she had taken advantage of my father. Only my father's father, she said, was kind to her.

Like many children, I was not wanted. I wasn't attended to, loved or lovingly cared for, and at two months I nearly surrendered my life for the first of several times. Penicillin saved me,

but my lungs from then on filled with water every winter. On many nights, for what felt like forever, I would cough and cough and cough until my lungs felt torn and burning, until one of my parents came to care for me, if they came at all. My coughing angered them. “You kept me awake all night!” one or both would say. Then why didn’t you come, I wondered?

Years later, my therapist would say that my coughing was me crying out to be loved. Maybe. But maybe I was like the relentless widow before the judge in the Gospel parable (Luke 18:1-8) , not letting God forget for one minute where I was and how I felt about it , and where I really wanted to be, in my real home far from here.

For years of my childhood, I knelt at the window of the attic bedroom I shared with my sister late into the night, watching trucks rumble down the busy road on which we lived. There I prayed for rescue, prayed that someone might see me at the window, recognize my misery, and come for me. There I envisioned my death, planned my disappearance, and hoped without really believing that they would miss me when I was gone. I begged God for rescue. I wished on stars. If not at birth, I had certainly become the relentless widow before I was seven years old.

Twenty-five years or so from the day I was born, I sat in a therapy session with Taylor, a man whose name was given me the year before by a friend named Pat on a day I'd said aloud that I needed one good reason not to kill myself. For four years I saw Taylor, three and four times a week for half-hour sessions, as I crawled toward living through the mire of my history. I was in a session with Taylor this one afternoon when, out of nowhere, there floated up to my consciousness the image of a face — wrinkled, kind, with glasses, framed in white hair — looking down at me, holding me. In her arms, I was very small.

I told Taylor about it (I could never call him by his first name — my half-brother’s first name — he was just Taylor when I wrote or spoke about him. I never once actually called him

by name.) I told him about the face that had just floated up to me and wondered aloud who it was. He suggested that someday I would know who she was and what she had meant to me.

A year or so later, when I'd come far enough in therapy to be able to speak to my mother, I told her about the image of the kind old woman holding me and asked if she knew who it might be. She did. It was the night nurse who had cared for me when I was in the hospital with pneumonia at two months old. She said this woman used to rock me when she wasn't busy. When I pressed for more information, Mom said, "I didn't like her." "Why?" I asked. "Because she blamed me for you being sick — she said the only thing this baby needs is love."

She was right, of course, which Mom never denied. Mom didn't remember her name, so she has ever remained "the white-haired nurse" to me. Years later — many years later — when I'd become a white-haired woman myself, that memory of the old nurse floated richly back to me as I rocked a baby in a hospital where I worked as a chaplain. (In ways we don't fully fathom, I think our pasts prepare us for what is yet to be.)

Life is a process of taking what life has given and creating of it something new. Or: Life is a set of experiences that build us, form us, teach us, for purposes we don't know or understand, until a moment comes when we truly see.

There is so little of childhood, even now after years of therapy and wisdom born of age. There is being fingered in the dark and in broad daylight by my father's calloused, dirty hands. There is, even as young as age one and a half, trying to devise ways to avoid being "messed with" as I slept. There was, from very early on, because of being messed with in the dark, avoidance of sleep, hours spent awake and afraid, so keyed up sleep wouldn't come.

Another of my mother's stories, one she told as proof of what a strange little child I was, involved my caring for others rather than myself. She spoke of finding me in my crib, curled up

asleep, with no blanket, at the foot of my crib. At the head of the crib, tucked in neatly under the blanket, were my stuffed animals and dolls. Mom thought this nightly routine of mine was proof of my love for my animals and dolls. Maybe it was; but I came to believe that it was more likely a form of self-preservation, trying to fool the attacker into fingering another form.

Once when I was nine or ten years old, I was in our living room and my father was dancing with and fingering my baby sister, who was less than one. On his face a deranged and terrifying leer. He was laughing, smiling and singing. My baby sister was laughing too, but anxiously. Her eyes connected with mine and I saw the panic and terror there. I wanted to stop him. I wanted to say something that would make him quit; but I was as afraid and powerless as I had been as a little child.

As I watched him fingering her, pretending to be “tickling,” I had an awakening, at a level not fully conscious yet realized that he was preparing her as he had been preparing me. On a deeper level, in a place of knowing and not knowing simultaneously, I understood what he was preparing her for, for I knew what happened when one’s preparation was complete. I longed to take my baby sister in my arms and carry her away, to rescue her from what in her still-new life had already begun — the terrible, unshakable realization that even one’s body is not one’s own, but the property of another (or others) to be sacrificed at will.

Even as I write and remember this now, more than fifty years later, my genitals throb and burn. That was the worst of it, that in spite of my terror and involuntary sacrifice, I was sometimes aroused by the things he did to me and so, in my mind, I was responsible. I was the guilty one. I had, as he often told me, “asked for it.” Because my body betrayed me, I believed I was to blame.

Once, when I was in my forties, my father told of a night when we kids were young and

he and Mom were invited to the home of a “perfectly uptight, holier-than-thou family” who went to our church. The conversation turned to babies crying in the night. According to Dad, he told this “perfect parent” couple that he never had any trouble with crying kids. He just took a piece of string, put it around our throats, and turned and twisted it until we could neither breathe nor cry, and we’d “pipe right down.” “That shut them up good,” Dad said, referring to the perfect couple. When he laughed his demon laugh, I knew he wasn’t joking.

All my life I’ve had an abiding tendency to feel choked by anything that sits too snugly around my neck — a turtleneck, a necklace, a blanket or pajama top twisted in the night. I can’t abide anything tight around my throat even now. At that moment in my forties, as Dad laughingly told the tale, I at last understood the feeling of being choked that had been an often unconscious and previously incomprehensible piece of my life since infancy. “We know and we don’t know,” as Taylor used to say.

I made a drawing when I was in therapy with Taylor in my twenties. I made many drawings during that time, and am sharing some of them in this memoir. In this particular drawing, I had envisioned my mind as a jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces. When a moment occurs like the one with my Dad and his piece of string, in which some aspect of awareness or experience crystallizes, it is like a puzzle piece not just fitting but banging into place, sharp as the slamming of a metal door. But instead, a door opens, and disparate realities become linked by beams of light. That light is clarity of understanding. It is a gift, however painful, when it comes.

We learn our stories backwards, in segments, non-chronologically, non-linearly. Our minds teem as with meteor showers, with seemingly random glimmerings. With them we seek to make sense of our lives. Our minds are drawers full of photographs, like my mother’s drawers, photos jumbled and piled together, disordered, unlabeled, tinged or faded, some of them bent,

torn, corners gone. We pick them up and put them down, trying to make sense of them, trying to glean our own stories and truths from the frozen smiles and frowns.

When I started therapy at twenty-four, I could hardly speak to Taylor. I was frozen in place by need but unable to even begin to tell the tale, and so repressed that I wasn't yet sure what the tale might be. In those first, largely silent sessions, Taylor would try to invite me to speak with statements like these: "Tell me about your mother." My answers were terse single sentences, words bitten off through a throat and mouth swollen tight with fear, words like these:

"I love her, but she's hard to love."

"She has never loved me."

"Tell me about your father," he would say.

"I hate him." How quickly these words came.

"Why do you hate him?"

"Because he's a son of a bitch."

"Because he beat us."

"Because he's a mean drunk."

"I just hate him, that's all. I don't know why."

"We know and we don't know," Taylor would say. Indeed we do. I knew I hated my father. I knew I hated my life and had to figure out why or die. I really didn't, at that time, know why. But there were glimmerings.

On that day in a sociology class described in the introduction, my mind opened to looking at our lives, our cultures and our families systematically. I was at last beginning to understand that my story, my experience, was not unique, that it was possible to look at life from the outside and try to make sense of it. Of course, academic understanding can only take us so far, and then

we have to go deeper, take the inner journey, begin to feel.

On that day in class, when the professor had explained the real meaning of taboos, incest in particular, I was rattled to the core. At that moment I furtively remembered that something deep, dark and forbidden lay in my family tree; I knew that what I had been told could not be true was true. But at that time I could not speak it; it would be some years before I could. But I knew that incest is a universal taboo, universally practiced — not in every family, but in every culture, and not in rare, aberrant cases, but in the people next door (maybe on both sides) around the world. This kind of learning opens the closets of our minds.

Our stories are uniquely our own, and we define and reconnect their frames again and again, as our awareness changes and our understanding deepens — if we dare to look at all. No two stories are comparable. No two experiences of pain and suffering can be measured relative to another.

And yet, at the same time, our stories are all the same. “Human beings,” Taylor would say, “are in a very early stage of their evolution.” We are a damaged species, filled with hurts we cause ourselves and inflict on one another. Women and children around the world are abused, violated, taken as spoils of war, beaten, prostituted, and blamed for the other’s actions. Men, too, abused in words, violence, condemnations, shaming ... and themselves abusers of their wives, their young. We kill our own.

There are not yet enough human beings who hold within them carefully tended seeds of love and who have gone through their pain to places of balance and joy. We must stop doing such harm to the next generations, stop damaging the hearts and minds, bodies and souls of the world’s children. Our stories across time and cultures are both unique and ever the same. We need a new story.



Chapter Two

“...but at length the truth will out.”

William Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice*, Act II, Scene 2.

When she knew she was dying but was still aware, my mother, one day, out of nowhere, said to me, “Do you know why I didn’t do anything about what your father and brother did to you?” I said, “No, but I’d sure like to know.” “Because,” she said, “It’s what my father and brothers did to me, and I thought it was just the way of the world.” She was right. It is. (But as Taylor would say, “That’s an explanation, but it’s not an excuse.”)

What a moment of truth that was for me when Mom said those words. Finally, more than forty years after my abuse began, clearing her slate as she prepared to die, Mom admitted that my story was true, and that it was her story, too. I felt both grateful and saddened to know that she’d known and looked away and that she, too, had suffered as a child. And what sad irony, that she’d run from her abusers and married one, a common tale.

There is no getting away. Our numbers are legion and our histories travel with us where we go. I speak this truth because it is commonplace; and, we must see clearly who we are, and what formed us, in order not to be doomed to inflict the sins of our ancestors on those who follow.



Chapter Three
“..The Cannibals that of Each Other Eat”

William Shakespeare. Othello, Act I, Scene 3.

Abuses usually come in sets — not just physical violence, not just sexual exploitation, not just emotional rejection — but packaged sets. If children (and women) are not respected, if they are not loved, if they are seen by their caregivers as burdens, as chattel, as slaves, one thing leads to and supports another. My family was no exception.

Abuses come in all sizes. When I was two, my mother pushed me into the deep foundation of a new home under construction in our neighborhood. I don't remember the details, but I remember her rage.

What brought it on? Was I tugging on her hand? Or trying to pull my hand away? Was I whining or crying or sad? Had I already been hurt — by her or by Dad — and she needed a story with a witness — a neighbor lady who was there when I fell but didn't see the fall? I don't know. But she shook me off, and I fell and broke my arm.

Taken to the doctor, casted, unable to suck my thumb, my comforter, for weeks.... I was still sucking my thumb at age seven... and wetting my bed. I lived in fear.

Cruelties can be both large and small. Once Dad took a glass of water my sister was drinking and filled it with gin, then laughed heartily as she choked and spat and struggled to breathe. Once he painted a paste of hot dry mustard mixed with a little water on my thumb to break me of the habit. My burning mouth was painful, but in the end I think it was shame at his laughter and ridicule that caused me to quit.

One of my sons sucked his thumb when he was young. I found the sight of him, thumb in mouth, fingers caressing the satin rim of his blanket, so sweet, so beautiful. It comforted me to

see him able to comfort himself. He quit when he started school.

As for bed-wetting — in my child's mind, it was not infantile regression but fear that was its cause: fear of crossing the darkness and making my way down the stairs; fear of the monster at the top of the stairs — my half-brother — through whose space I had to walk to get to the stairs; and fear of the monsters at the bottom, too — my parents. Even if my half-brother didn't grab me, one or both of my parents were likely to be angered by my coming down to the bathroom and waking them. I lived immersed in fear; there were dangers all around.

So, because the journey to the bathroom at night was full of danger, I'd awake with the need and then go back to sleep. And eventually I'd dream of getting up, of creeping down the stairs, of sitting on the toilet. Then I would awaken to wetness, at first thinking that I had forgotten to raise the toilet seat. As I came to the surface of consciousness, I'd realize with horror that I'd wet my bed.

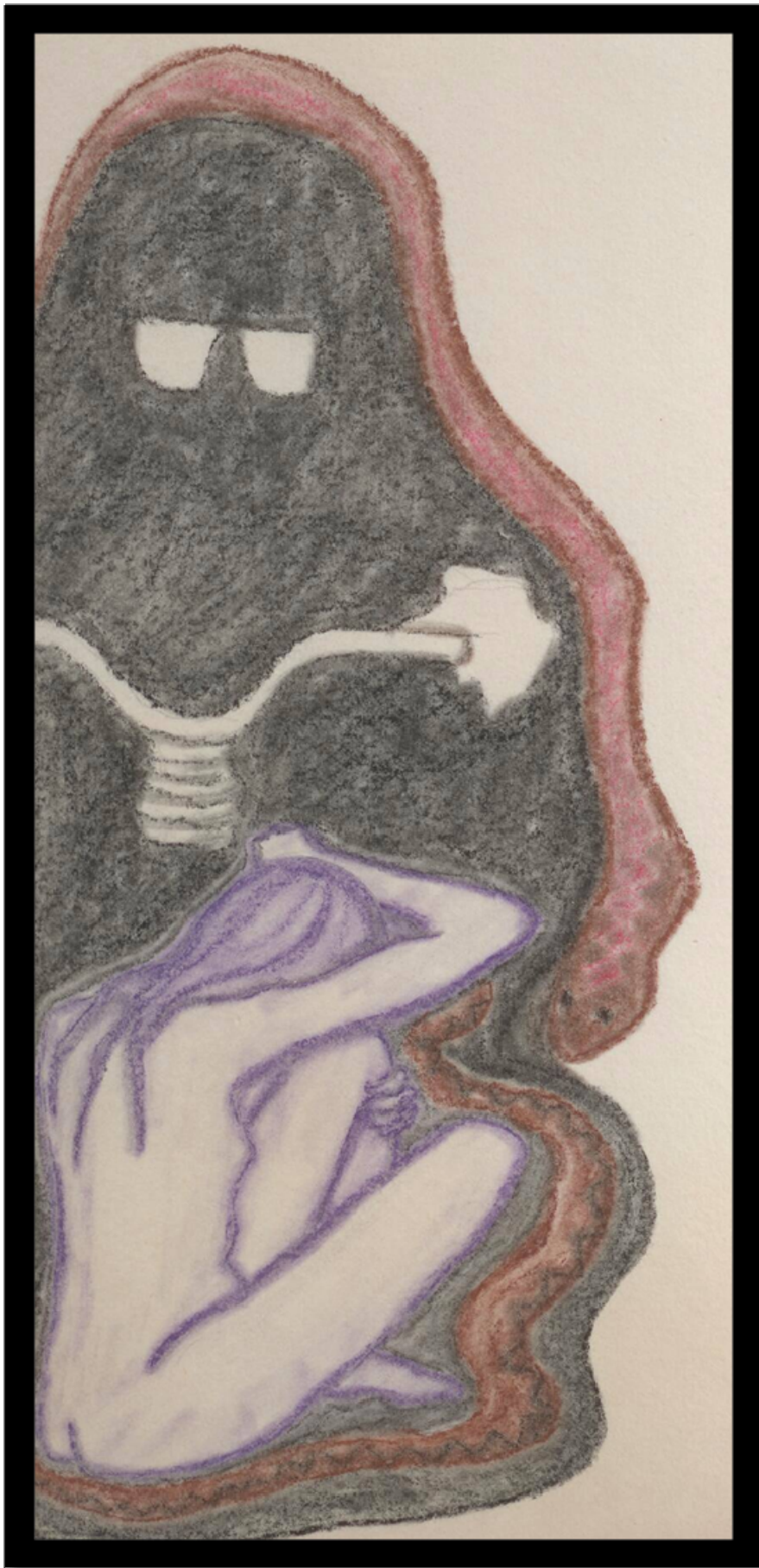
My parents got so angry when I wet my bed that when I did I'd take off my clothes in the dark, find a dry spot on the bed, and curl up to sleep again. In the morning I'd cover my bed with the blanket to hide my sin and sleep on that same polluted bedding again, though it was smelly and stiff, until I could sneak it down to the basement to be washed. I'm not sure when I stopped bed-wetting, but it may have been when the monster at the top of the stairs was thrown out of the house when he turned sixteen. I was eight.

Ridicule, continual angry outbursts between my parents and toward each of us, sudden slaps that took me unaware... these were the form and backdrop of daily life in my family. Many times just the sight of my face threw my parents into a rage. "Wipe that look off your face," one or the other would shout! I was ever mystified. What was this look of mine that they hated so much?

And then, not often yet far too often, there were beatings with a belt, at least once with the buckle end. Once Dad was in such a rage that Mom called him off, but not until he had covered my backside and legs with welts and wounds.

There was an animal meanness and misery in my family home, a place of so few resources of every kind that we were cannibals — at least my four older family members cannibalized me. They ate up my trust in other human beings. They devoured my self-esteem. They chewed away at me until I was almost gone. Maya Angelou once described being in the company of people who made her feel like she was being pecked to death by ducks. The animals with whom I lived had teeth.

The only tenderness I received as a child was given to me by persons not in my immediate family. Within my family, when I was a child, there was no such thing as love. And, in various ways, with varying degrees of neglect or violence, this is how many children live, and have ever lived. Certainly it was how my parents themselves were raised.



Chapter Four

Blood Thicker than Water

According to my mother, the day I first met Mr. Maurer, the retired barber who lived next door, was on a summer day when I was two. I ran from the house crying, she said, because she'd been tugging at the snarls in my hair with a comb. When I ran across his yard, Mr. Maurer, sitting on his front porch, called out to me and asked why I was crying. My mother, who came running after me, said she'd been trying to get the snarls out of my hair. He asked for a brush and told her he would brush the snarls from my hair.

He did. Gently, lovingly, beginning at the bottom of the strands, holding the hair above where he brushed so there were no sharp tugs on my scalp. Lovingly. Loving me. From that day on, his front porch became my haven. Sometimes he brushed my hair, but mostly he talked to me. He called me princess. He and Mrs. Maurer had no children. So maybe I was a gift to his life, too. He died when I was four.

On the back of a class picture of me from first grade, I at some point wrote "Princess" in a careful cursive hand. In the years that followed, when other family members came across that photo in one of the many drawers in which photos came and went, I was taunted for daring to think of myself as "Princess."

Once when I was small — 3 or 4 maybe, I don't exactly know, I was sitting on the floor in the living room watching and listening as my aunt, my Dad's sister, was talking with Mom. My older sister was there, too. My aunt looked at me and said, "She's a cute little thing, but...." Looking then at my sister, she continued, "I just don't take to her like this one. Blood's thicker than water."

I had no idea what those words meant, but I saw my mother stiffen, and I understood that

somehow, for some reason, there was truth to my feeling like “less than,” even with my aunt. I loved this aunt — and her many kindnesses over many years helped save me — but for some period of time when I was small, she did not claim me as her brother’s own.

I talked with Taylor about this in therapy, after I’d come to know deeply why I hated my Dad. I spoke of how I wondered if my aunt was right and Dad was not my real father, that maybe I was conceived with another man on the trip to the states, just before Mom, with daughter and son in tow, got to their new home. Mom had even spoken once, years before, in a vague way, about a steward on the ship who took special care of her on the way over.

When I told Taylor this, he asked, “Which would you rather it be, Jeanne? That the man who did these things to you was your real father, or not?” I said I didn’t want Dad to be my real father, and he asked why. “Because if he’s not my real father, then I could know that he no longer is any part of me.” But, of course, that could never be true. Who my dad was and what he did to me will always be a part of who I am. But now, at last, I am so much more.

Years later, I came across a yellowed newspaper clipping from a Chicago paper listing the war brides and children who’d just arrived on the Queen Mary, including my Mom. The dates in the clipping meant that I could not have been the product of an ocean romance. So, in that sense too, there is still no escaping my father; his genes swim in me.

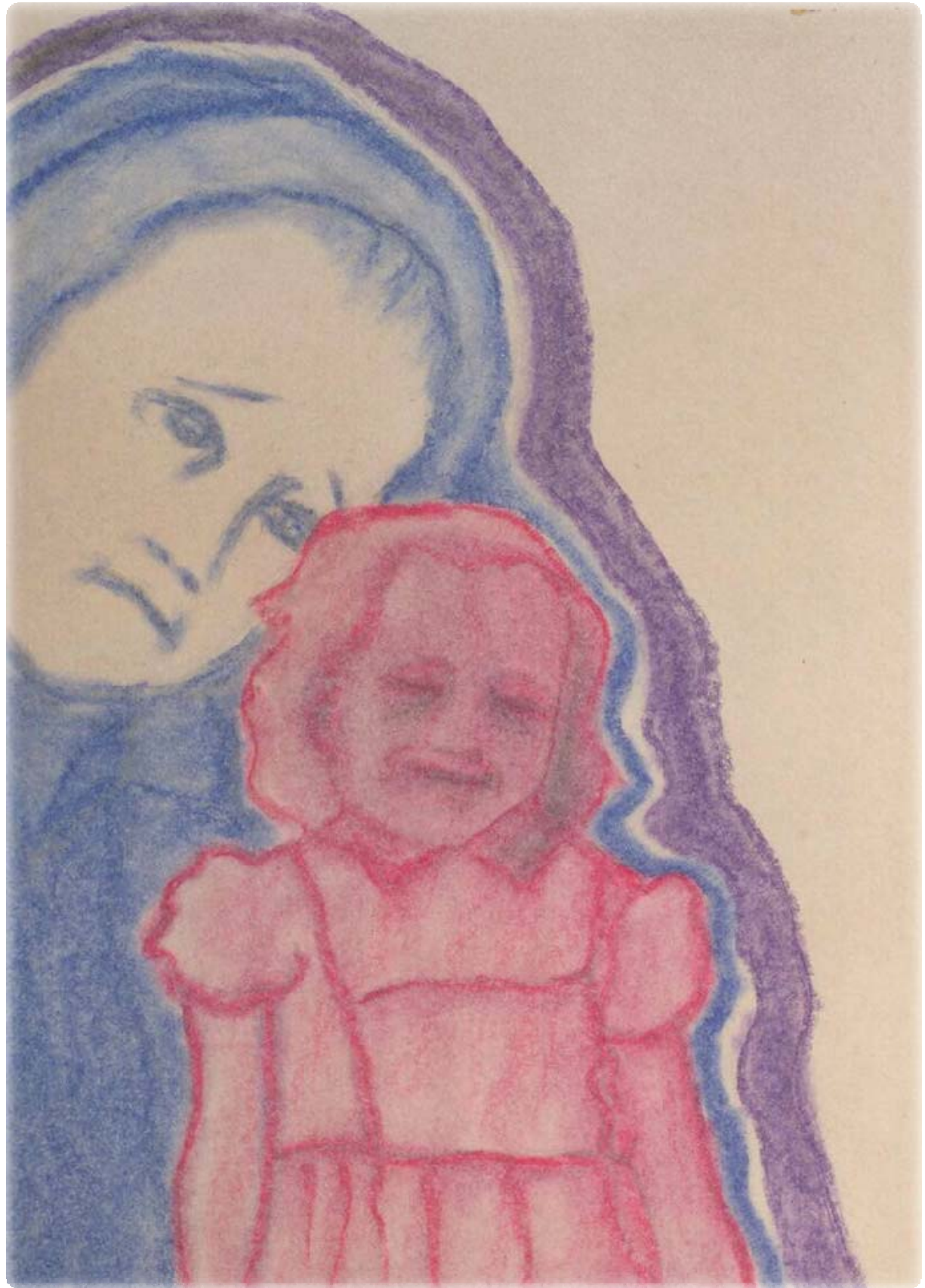
There are pieces to my story, to every person’s story, that will always be uncertain. More than is known, probably. When we live in houses built of secrets and deceit, there’s not that much to know, or ask, or say.

I was four when my half-brother brought his friend Dave over and ordered me to pull down my pants and lay on my bed so he could show his friend my genitals. I was mortified, and afraid of what would happen next, but Mom came home just then — I heard the back door slam

as she came in — and I jumped up and ran downstairs and told her what had happened. She grimly ordered me to go into her bedroom and to stay there until she said I could come out. Then she called the boys downstairs, spoke to them in a whisper, and sent them outside.

I waited and waited in her room for her to come for me, but she didn't. My brother was outside with his friend and I was in my parents' bedroom, isolated, waiting to be summoned. It was clear to me even at that time that I was the one being punished and, of course, in my shame, I had already found myself to blame. This was the first of several times my brother shared me with a friend. When Dad came home for supper, I came out of the room. Mom said she had forgotten me.

In my aunt's mind, the saying, "Blood's thicker than water" meant that family ties — blood ties — are deeper than ties to others. Perhaps she was right. Family ties are certainly darker, and the wounds inflicted are deeper, than with those outside.



Chapter Five

Gifts and Pain Entwined

I was four when Mr. Maurer died. I was too afraid of Mrs. Maurer, who yelled at us when we cut across her yard, to go visit Mr. Maurer if he wasn't on the front porch when I went outside.

I remember it was winter. Cold. Mom had been cooking and the windows were steamed up. Dad went out the side door for some reason and then came back in, leaving the inner door open and the steamy glass door exposed. Dad whispered something to Mom about Mr. Maurer. I went to the side door to look, to see, wiped away the steam and saw a big bundle being carried on a cot of some kind and placed in the back of a big black car. I asked my mother, "What is it?" And she said, "Mr. Maurer died." (I thank her for that truth.)

I don't remember if I cried, but I remember suddenly feeling all alone. Our collie dog Lady had died at the side of our road the summer before, hit by a car. I saw it happen and ran to her; she didn't move. I ran to get Mom, crying; when she saw Lady, she pulled me away. "She's dead." (Another truth told — thank you.) "Come inside." So I knew what death meant. And now Mr. Maurer had died.

But between winter and spring, I half forgot about his death, and on the first warm day I ran to his porch, but he wasn't there. A fear stirred within me, and the thought resurfaced that he was gone. I became so desperate to know for sure that I walked up to the front door of his house and knocked.

Mrs. Maurer opened the door. Something in her face affirmed my fear, but she held the screen door open and I marched inside, looking for evidence that he was there. She said, "He's gone." I don't remember walking out the door and going home. Mr. Maurer died a second time

that day for me.

That summer I begged my mother to let me go to school. I desperately wanted to read and she wouldn't teach me. She kept saying, "You'll learn when you go to school." And so I begged to go to school.

For years I'd seen her disappear into books. When she was reading, she was unreachable. Almost no sound of ours could penetrate her ears. I didn't know what it meant, really, to read, but I knew that to do so offered escape and that there were other stories there. I needed escape, and I desperately wanted to learn there were other stories than my own.

Either because I was the persistent widow, or because she admired my desire though she wouldn't teach me, or maybe because she was as eager to be rid of me as I was to be gone — whatever her reasons, she convinced the nuns to let me in, at not yet five, to kindergarten at St. Mary's School.

Kindergarteners sat at a low table in the back of the room. First and second graders sat in rows of desks between our table and the front of the class, where stood Sister Alberta, a tiny woman, ancient to my eyes. There were eight or ten of us at the back table and many more of the others. Sister Alberta gave our table pictures to color and boxes of crayons. We colored all morning.

Mom liked to tell that I left school sobbing that day and that when she jumped from the car to learn what was wrong, I cried, "I didn't learn how to read!" She had promised me I would learn when I got to kindergarten, and I had finally gone, but I didn't learn to read. Mom found this a hilarious story. We seldom laughed at the same things when I was young.

In time I learned to read in spite of kindergarten, where mostly we colored, because I listened intently to the lessons shared with the older children. I loved colors but was bored by

having to color the flat dull images on the pages we were given. But I was eager to please, and very much wanted to stay in school, where there was no yelling or hitting and it was quiet, orderly, and clean.

One day I was given a stupid fish to color. Flat. Fat. Lifeless. There was nothing about it that inspired. Yet that was the day I learned the impact of color intermixed on paper. Years later, I made a visual poem about it. Here are its words:

"When I was in kindergarten, my teacher (too many children, not enough time) gave me a page from a coloring book to color. (It's not her fault — they did that then.) On it was a stupid fish. I wondered what I could possibly do to make such a stupid image interesting.

But then I had an inspiration that led to my first real act of creative exploration and artistic pleasure. I peeled my blue crayon and laid it on its side inside the fish and colored in, creating a pebbled surface of blue dots. Then I peeled a red crayon and did the same. Now the stupid fish was beautiful, blue and red up close and purple from far away. I had made a color discovery. I had transformed a stupid fish.

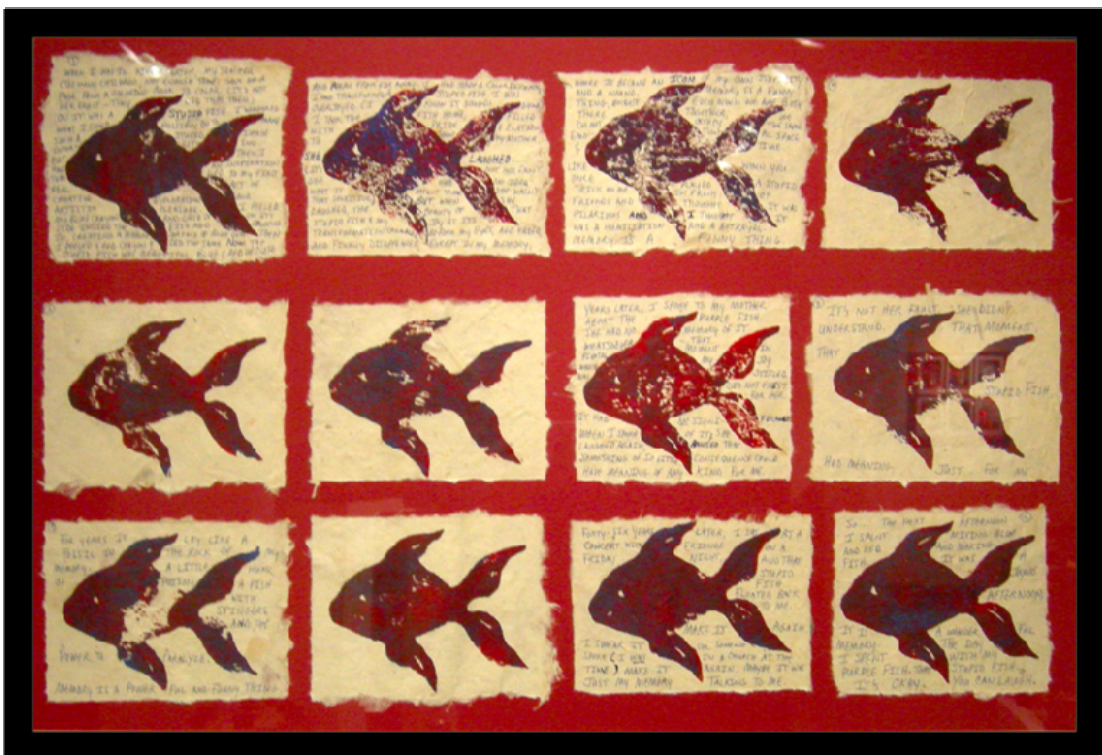
I was overjoyed. (I know it sounds dumb.) I took the fish home, filled with pride and elation, to show my mother. She laughed. (It's not her fault. She had no idea what it meant to me. She wasn't that sensitive.) But when she laughed the beauty of that stupid fish and my joy at its transformation crumbled before my eyes, and faded, and finally disappeared, except in memory, where it became an icon of my own stupidity, and a wound.

Memory is a funny thing, because even when we are both there together, we do not occupy the same emotional space and time. Like when you once played a stupid trick

on me in front of friends and thought it was hilarious and I thought it was a humiliation and a wound. Memory is a funny thing.

Years later, I spoke to my mother about the purple fish. She had not memory of it — that pivotal moment in which my joy was stifled did not exist for her. It had no significance when I spoke of it; she laughed again, amused that something of so little consequence could have meaning of any kind for me. It's not her fault. She didn't understand. That moment, that stupid fish, had meaning just for me. For years it lay like a fossil in the rock of my memory. A little hunk of poison, a fish with stingers and the power to paralyze.

Memory is a powerful and funny thing. Forty-six years later, I sat at a conference with friends on a Friday night and that stupid fish floated back to me. Make it again. I swear it or someone spoke. (I was in a church at the time.) Make it again. Maybe it was just my memory talking to me. So... the next afternoon I spent mixing blue and red inks and making fish. It was a joyous afternoon. It is a wonderful memory. The day I spent with my purple fish. That stupid fish. It's okay. You can laugh."



I make artwork with dots of color still today, but with paint, and differently — no stupid outlines of fish anymore for me.

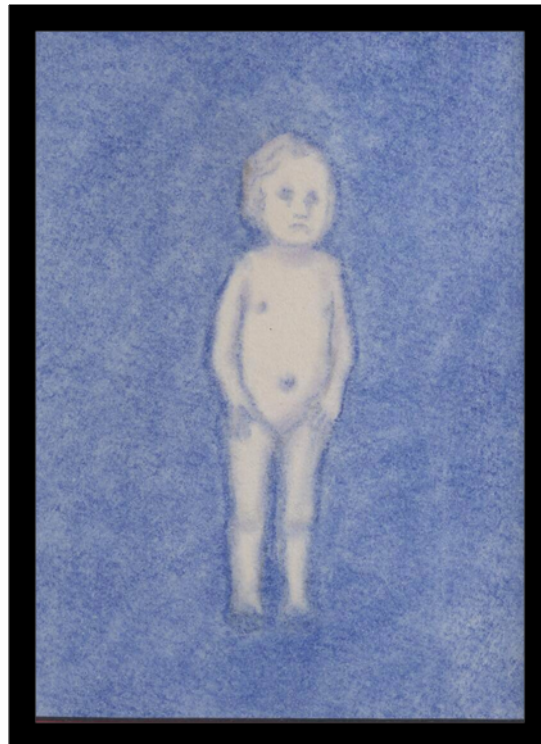
It's amazing how life's experiences, especially early ones, reverberate through our lives: how Sister Alberta's inability to teach three classes of children at one time gifted me with time (and need) to explore color and to grow to love applying color to surfaces; how my mother's escape from our lives through books made a lifelong reader of me; how my father's paints and brushes (forbidden to me) cast a deep hunger in me to hold a brush, to stroke paint on things, to color the world.

I was only allowed to clean his brushes while I watched him paint, but how I loved to feel them in my hand and to explore the ways that colors blended in the jar of turpentine. How I loved the interplay of colors and randomness of strokes of paint on the cloths we used to dab and stroke the brushes clean — and how I love them still, now that paint and brushes are my own. I came to hate the smell of turpentine, though, on the hands with which he would penetrate and then leave his scent on me. The scent would stay. (Acrylics are the paint for me.)

How I was more than fifty years old before I understood and could say to myself, tenderly, as I stood in the shower, “You don't have to burn your flesh, Jeanne. It wasn't you who was unclean. Turn the hot water down.” How the white-haired woman was a gift to me. And Mr. Maurer was gift. And Sister Alberta's too full classroom, and my father's paints (even though I couldn't use them) and the feel of brushes were a gift to me, even though his abuse of me did so much harm. Harm. Hot showers. Night terrors. Repetition compulsion. Self-hate. Fear of the dark. Self-degradation. The gifts that came wrapped in packages of great harm were real, but that harm was real as well, and lasting, and in no way tempered by the gifts. You fathers, brothers, uncles, priests. You neighbors, pedophiles, predators, perps. Don't kid yourselves for one

moment that we asked for it, or liked it, or won't remember it anyway, or that you did no harm. The harm you do is immeasurable. At your death, I am certain, you will know. You will see. You will understand what you did to the children you fed upon. You will see. I believe there comes a moment for each of us when we will fully see and know the impact of every action we've taken in our lives. There are so many I regret. But sexual cannibalization of children, generation to generation, at least with my own children, stopped with me, and for that I am grateful and glad.

We need to save our children and ourselves. We need to save all children everywhere.



Chapter 6
It's the Little Things in Life...

“For I desired mercy and not sacrifice....” Hosea 6:6

My Dad's abuses began in my infancy. They were abuses of preparation: fingering; stimulating; grinning; leering; and hungering for young flesh. My brother's began when I was four. My mother, whose reality I didn't understand, seemed most of the time to hate the sight of me. “Wipe that look off your face,” she said to me a thousand times — Dad, too, but less often.

What was this look they hated so? Was my sadness palpable? Did the depth with which I looked at them cause them to fear what I saw? I never knew. I knew only that at times the sight of me was enough to provoke their rage. Sometimes I'd go into their bedroom and look at myself in the mirror on their dresser, the only mirror I was tall enough to see my face in. What was the look they hated so? What did it say? I had no idea.

My sister hated me, too, perhaps in imitation of how she saw my parents speak to me. We shared a bedroom, always, and she hated me.

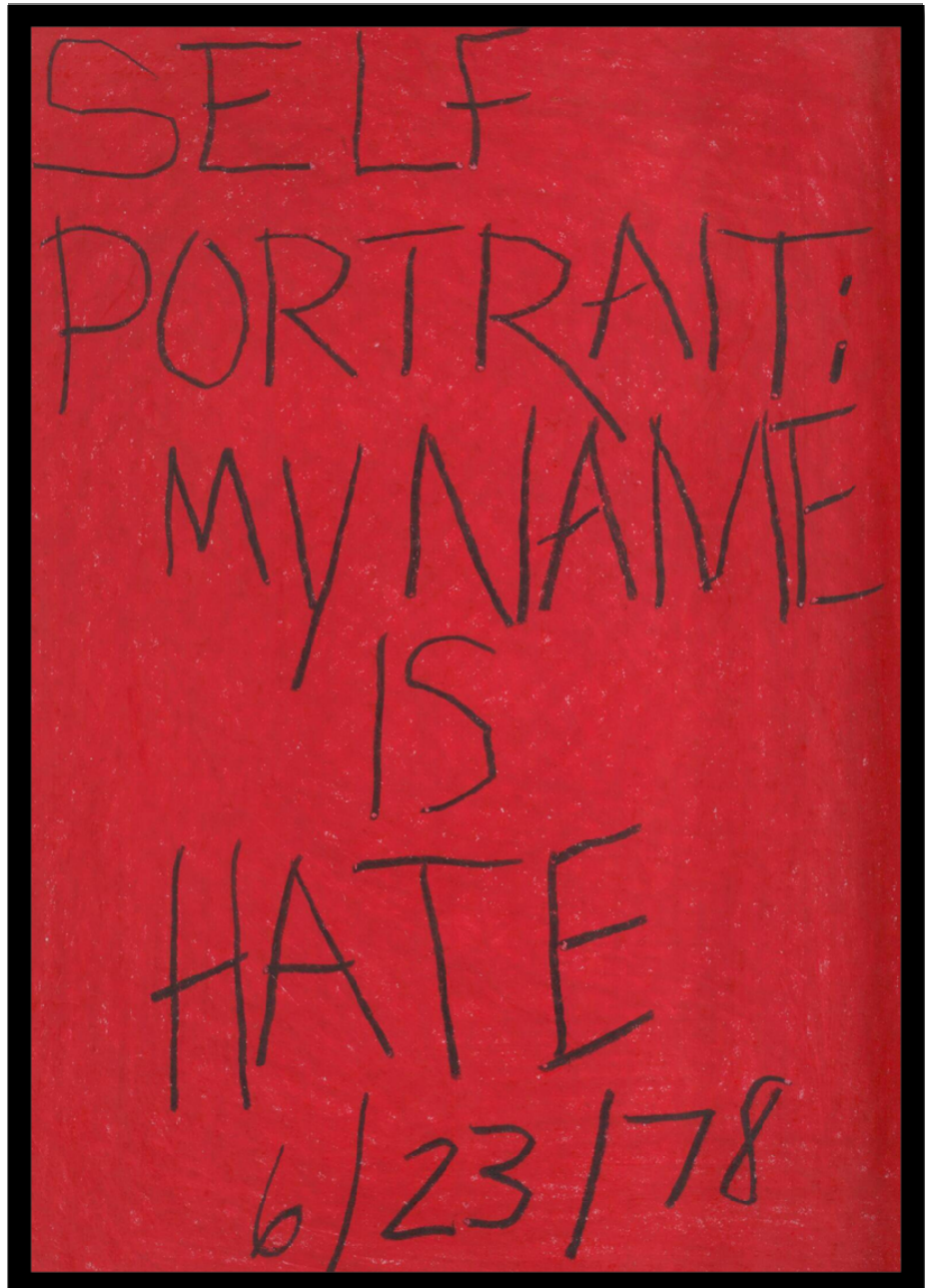
One summer day when I was four, she went across our busy street and down the block to play with a girl who was my age. I wanted to go with her, to be a part of whatever their play might be. I begged Mom to let me cross the street alone and followed her, to see if they would let me play with them. When Mom finally agreed, I went, further than I'd ever walked alone before. As I approached the house where my sister was, I heard them playing on the screened front porch.

As I approached, my sister spotted me and said loud enough for me to hear that she would hide and that her friend should meet me at the porch door and say that my sister wasn't there. So the girl did, although I could see in her face that she didn't want to tell the lie. I was

crushed, more by my sister's deceit and betrayal than by not being allowed to join in their play, and sobbed my way home.

Our lives are molded by such tiny things that form and frame our perceived realities. We are made of fragile substances, easily nicked, dented, scratched, and scarred. We grow heavy with feelings we cling to and can't let go — hurts nursed and nurtured that don't diminish over time but grow, resentments fed by continual stirring and adding sticks to the fire. The more and longer these feelings are stored and fed, the less room there is for joy, the less time for growing — instead, the slow and steady crushing of our spirits and our souls.

Even now, after all these decades of growing and letting go, there is this place in me that shuts and bolts like a castle door when memories of my sister come to me. Even now, I've not yet forgiven completely her childhood shunning of and snapping at me. I wish I could,



and we work together at reconnecting. I ask the Divine to forgive her for me until my own forgiveness is complete.

It's ironic that I've long since forgiven my parents for the damage they did to me, for their refusal to love as well as for their abuses over so many years. Yet I still struggle to release completely my two older siblings. In my mind, we were peers; we were supposed to be a team, us against them — our parents. I felt we should stand with and defend one another. Instead we pecked like chickens at each other's wounds, exerting damage of our own, and took turns throwing each other to our parent wolves.

When I was young I responded with hurt and sadness and did not fight back. But my skin thickened as more scars appeared. I learned to turn on them, or at least on my sister, more out of hurt than rage at first, but then there was much more rage. The rooms we shared, first a little room downstairs, then a larger room up, were armed camps filled with sniping and spitting and speaking hate. At one point, we drew a line between the two sides of our room and fought over who crossed over, as many siblings do.

I had a colleague years ago at a university where I taught who used to joke that the reason the politics in universities is so dirty is because the stakes are so low. Our family was like that. There was so little of everything to be had — food, comforts, clothing, affection, order, privacy, attention, love — that we turned on each other to fight for them. It was a losing battle on all sides. There wasn't enough to go around of anything we needed, and we blamed each other.

Our father sometimes referred to us, his children and children yet to be, as “another goddamn mouth to feed” (never mind that he drank more nourishment than any of the rest of us received). When I was in graduate school in my early twenties, at a university near home, he

greeted me often when I stopped by with, “Well, if it isn’t the professional freeloader, the perpetual student.” (I received no money for my schooling from them.)

One day when I was in my late twenties, on a by-then-much-less-frequent visit home, he greeted me with those words for the last time. When he said, “Here comes the freeloader,” and grinned, a grin ever stained with disdain, I spun on him with an intensity and rage that scared us both, and I growled, “Listen, you — I’ve paid in blood for everything I ever got from you. Don’t you ever say that again!” He was stunned into silence, as was everyone nearby, and he turned and walked away.

My sister’s tiny betrayals grew larger and more dangerous as we grew. When Mom was at work or in the hospital (both frequent occurrences), either ill or releasing “another goddamn mouth to feed,” Dad would call one of us down from our beds and into his, so we could “listen for the phone.” Then he would go out drinking and come home. It wasn’t long before my sister routinely begged off with feeling sick or having headaches, so he would summon me. Looking back on her sending of me, I feel sad now that any child was ever so desperate to escape suffering and so unable to love that she would sacrifice a younger sibling to save herself. At the time, though, I felt like a lamb sent to slaughter. And slaughtered I was.



Chapter 7

Perchance to Sleep, but Not to Dream

“To sleep, perchance to dream; ay, there’s the rub....” William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1

I’m more than sixty years old now and live alone. Yet my emotions surrounding “bed” are still problematic. I wrote earlier of the arrangement of dolls and stuffed animals in my crib and whether it was tenderness for them, or subterfuge, to protect myself. I vote for the latter option now.

Bed: the origins of the word suggest “hollow” or “dug-out” — a place in woods or field to sleep. A place to rest. But not for me; in woods or field or anywhere that sleep is sought, there prowl devouring beasts. In my early years, cold always, I huddled at the bottom of my crib. In childhood, I avoided bed as best I could, sitting at the window, reading under covers with a flashlight until my eyes or the batteries died, staying up all hours.... Bed, for me, was a place of dread.

In early childhood, 5-9, going to bed required elaborate preparation. Unable to understand or speak what was happening to me, I tried my best to protect myself from the nest of snakes beneath my bed that came out only in darkness, when they climbed the bedposts and onto me. So, to prevent their entry, I made my bed before I slept, tucking in each side and corner as tightly as I could, then slipping in between the blankets and sheets at the top as carefully as possible, on my back, hands at my sides beneath the blankets, blankets to chin, with only my head exposed. There I lay like a corpse, afraid to move or turn or make a sound, hoping that this time, this time, no snakes would find their way in. Though I tried for a long time to make a space of safety in my bed, my efforts failed. Snakes came. Snakes found their way to me.

Then followed years of kneeling at the window, falling asleep on the hard floor, perhaps with my pillow, when I could kneel no more. Always, always, trying my best to stay awake until silence fell, until all were sleeping, when maybe, maybe, I might be safe.



One's bed should be a safe place; mine was not. One's sleep should be undisturbed; mine was not. Many survivors are lucky to be able to sleep at all, because in our minds and hearts we are always waiting, always listening, on full alert, for the sounds of those who invade our sleep, our beds, our bodies, until there is no safe place. There is no place of rest.

Through most of my pre-teen and teenage years, I hardly slept at all, except in the brief hours before dawn; then I struggled and fought awakening when the voice of my father would holler up the stairs. In college, as in my family home, the only time of solitude was when all were sleeping, so I would read in bed. There, in a locked-tight women's dorm (well, not all that tight — I crawled out the basement window from time to time), I didn't fear invaders, robbers of my flesh and bones, at least while awake. But asleep, even in relative safety, in college as in childhood, my dreams were filled with terrors and fear. What did I dream of? I dreamed of flight, of being pursued, in danger, running for my life. I dreamed terror and helplessness and being utterly alone.

There were two recurrent dreams that haunted my childhood. In one I was alone in utter darkness, except for a streetlight under which I stood, with pitch black darkness all around. Far away, barely audible, as I stood there under the light, I heard a motorcycle engine ignite and rev. Then I heard it drawing closer, knowing that the one who rode it was coming for me. I was terrified, but I was also paralyzed and voiceless and could neither scream nor flee.

As the sound of the motorcycle engine drew nearer and ever louder, my terror rose. I felt trapped, exposed, my life in danger. Soon the sound of the roaring engine surrounded me; I tried to scream but no sound came. Then, deafened by the sound of the machine, I saw the front of the bike come into view. The light under which I stood reflected off the chrome of the fender and handlebars and the helmet and goggles of the one who came for me.

As the cycle came into view, I awoke, always, with an unvoiced scream in my throat, my body wet with sweat, the sound of my heart pounding in my ears. Wide awake, terrified, paralyzed still, I waited for the nightmare to recede, panting with fear. I had this dream over and over, countless times, from early childhood until the age of ten or twelve.

My father rode a motorcycle at the time I was born. Often, when drinking, he told stories of the games and tricks he and his motorcycle buddies played before marriage and parenthood imprisoned him. Once, when I was ten or twelve, Dad, loquacious in drunkenness, laughingly told a story about how when Mom was pregnant years before he'd taken her on a high-speed ride on his bike on bumpy gravel roads, trying to end her pregnancy. That would have been me, because the motorcycle was gone before my younger brother arrived. I wavered, during my years of therapy, between believing that this dream had to do with my father's abuse of me and thinking that somehow my terror associated with motorcycle sounds stemmed from a psychic awareness formed in the womb that someone was trying to kill me.

The other recurrent dream of my childhood was of fleeing in terror from someone who was trying to catch me and do me harm. I ran as fast as I could but could not escape the one who was pursuing me. I ran through woods and fields, faster and faster, hearing always the growing nearness of the one who was after me, until suddenly I was running so fast that I took flight and soared upward, floating on currents of air, my arms outspread. Below me, the fields and trees receded and, from that high vantage point, for a brief moment, so did my fear. I had escaped my pursuer. I was safe. But then, as suddenly as I'd taken to the air, I realized that I was going to fall, crash and die, because I had no means to remain aloft. With the realization came the descent. I awakened to the sound of my own cry of terror just before I hit the ground.

This dream pursued and haunted me beyond childhood into my late teens. In college, the

setting of the dream changed to a grim urban landscape. I tore in and out of doorways and onto the roofs of building, jumping from roof to roof, or down busy streets, dashing between moving cars and trucks. Still pursued, still terrified, but by then I had lost the ability to fly.

I have few nightmares now and they deal more with loss and woundedness, with fighting back in a fury of words against someone who has failed or refused to love me. Occasionally, though, from a deep sleep, I am sometimes jolted awake by a sound or sense that someone is near me, at the edge of my bed.

Damaged as I was, as all survivors are, however varied the ways, we can heal, but our minds and bodies hold dregs, hold residue, hold psychic remembrances of things long past.

Even still in my sixties, I resist going to bed and to sleep. I sit up late, reading, writing, thinking, long past exhaustion, no longer afraid most of the time but nonetheless possessed by a deep resistance to “bed.” However long I avoid it, however exhausted and half-asleep I may already be, when I climb into bed and turn off the lights, within seconds I’m wide awake, my mind a steady stream of thoughts, worries, anticipations, regrets... and on and on. It is a rare thing for me just to fall asleep.

I begin on my back, under cover, hands on my heart or at my side, corpse-like still. The I turn and turn again, circuit after circuit — back, right side, belly, left side, back again, right side, belly.... Usually when I awake I am on my belly, my arms tucked tightly at my sides, my hands one atop the other pressed against my torso above my breasts. Even then, I still awaken time and time again.

For those of us who carry such memories, even sleep is less a place of safety than of terror. I was in my fifties before I was able to lay most of my terrors down.

I AM NOT A MESSY
STICK SHITTING
GOING

I AM KILLING MYSELF

TO DIE

Chapter 8

Getting What's Deserved

When I was six years old, we moved for a year into a tiny country town with nothing more than a post office, a general store, a tavern, and twenty or so houses clustered nearby. My father was hired to manage the general store and we moved into an apartment above the store. My sister was eight, my half-brother fourteen, and my little brother was three.

The apartment was small and Mom was more miserable there than in our home, which was rented out while we were gone. It was there that my father fully raped me for the first time.

It was early summer, bright and warm, yet with cool breezes still blowing across the fields of corn. On this beautiful day, I felt happy and light. Summertime. No school. I was wearing my favorite dress, a polished cotton in a shade of blue that matched my eyes. I loved that dress, because I had received it new; not handed down from my sister; because it was my favorite color; because it was soft and comfortable; and because wearing it made me feel pretty, an utterly unexpected condition. I was able to wear it on this day to play in because I was growing out of it and soon it wouldn't fit me anymore.

I was running up and down the outside stairs to our apartment, wide wooden stairs sheltered at the top by a small wooden porch. I loved running down stairs; sometimes I came down them so fast that it felt like flying. The stairs were shaded from the sun and a cool breeze blew on my face and hair and bare legs as I ran up and down. For some reason — perhaps no clean underwear, a frequent occurrence, or maybe just because I wanted to feel my soft blue dress and the cool breeze on my bottom — I was naked beneath my dress.

As I started down the stairs for the last time that day, fast and happy, there was my father at the bottom of the stairs — maybe the sound of my feet running up and down had disturbed his

peace in the general store below. He saw my nakedness beneath my dress and was enraged. Suddenly my joy and sense of freedom turned to terror and shame.

“I know what you want,” he angrily declared. “I know what you’re looking for.” He grabbed me by the arm and hauled me into a cornfield behind the tavern next door, threw me down on the dirt and climbed aboard. When he left me there, I was covered in blood, my blue dress forever ruined, my heart broken, my soul ripped loose from its mooring. He went back to the store and I made my way back to the stairs that had been my ruin and the apartment above.

My mother saw my bloody dress and demanded to know what I’d done. I told her what had been done to me. And she lost her mind, screaming at me, hitting me, calling me “Liar! Liar!” She tore the dress over my head and arms and left me, naked and bereft, in my room. The dress was forever gone. And I was alone, sleep my escape, blood on my sheets, violated and blamed for my violation, denied my truth, all hope gone.

When second grade began, there in that country village, the bus driver was my father. I dreaded getting on the bus for the long rides home. At school that year, I had a teacher who was not kind. I had been raped by my father and my brother. My mother could not forgive me for speaking the truth that was taboo. My world had become a dangerous place.

In second grade, Catholic children make their first communion. The process was terrible, filled with warnings and threats. My first confession, at which I could not name the truth of my reality, was a lie, and so I left feeling more damned than when I went in. Taking communion, therefore, though my dress was white, was an unforgivable sin, defiling the Body of Christ by taking him into the ruin that was my own. I was doomed. Damned. I knew, irrevocably, that God had abandoned me.

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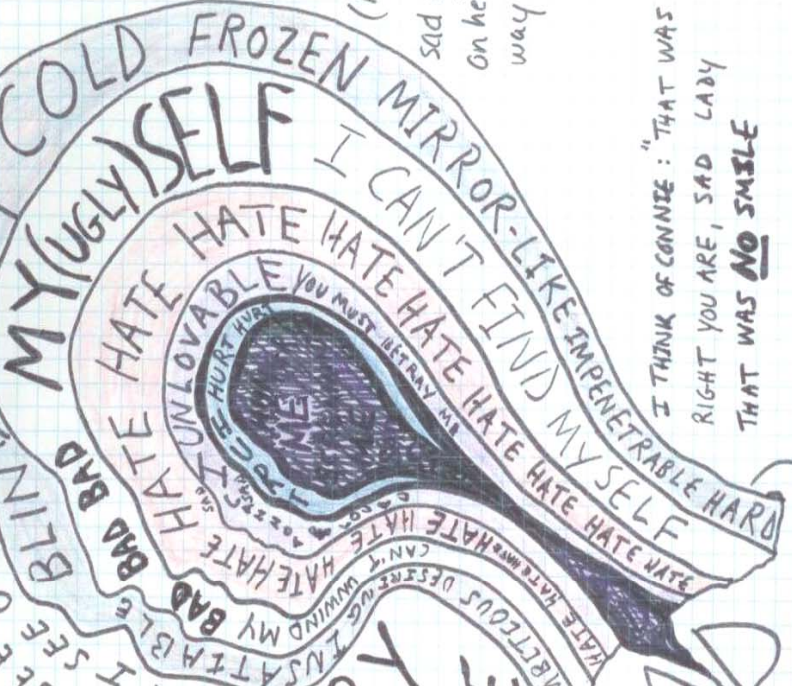
NOT QUITE ABLE TO PLACE THE FACE

you don't fool me / I see your wickedness and sad deceipts

SHE CAN SEE RIGHT THROUGH ME: FAMILIAR: KNOWS HOW BLACK I AM INSIDE.

BAD BAD DISGUSTING AND REVULSION YOU ARE OUT HERE AT ME LOOKING IN MY UGLY SELF

I SEE YOU YOU ARE BAD BADMAN SAD IN A MIRROR, NOT BLIND I SEE OUT HERE AT ME LOOKING IN MY UGLY SELF



red and blue make a kind of gray (like hurt and hate) the fish i drew was red and blue sad girl on her lonely way

I THINK OF CONNIE: "THAT WAS NO SMILE I PUT OUT IN THE ASHTRAY." RIGHT YOU ARE, SAD LADY THAT WAS NO SMILE

UNGRY LOVE PLEASE LOVE ME DON'T TOUCH ME I WON'T LET YOU IN. LOVE AWFUL WOUND AWFUL SORE LAYING DOWN TO EASE MY PAIN THIS IS HOW I SEE MY SELF TODAY...

CAN YOU POSSIBLY IMAGINE HOW I MUST FEEL?

Chapter 9

Mixed Blessings

“The barb in the arrow of childhood suffering is this: its intense loneliness, its intense ignorance.”

Olive Screiner (Ralph Iron), *The Story of an African Farm*, 1884. Chapter 1.

School was in many ways my haven, but in many ways, it was my curse. I loved learning, reading, having my own desk, my space, on which no one intruded much of the time. I loved coloring and making art projects.

In first grade we created a Mary altar at the back of class between two windows for the month of May. Around the statue of Mary, which was taller than I was, we made and hung paper chains of pink and blue, and vases of flowers we brought from home to place at Mary’s feet. I never felt close to Mary as a child — she was perfect, and I was full of self-loathing. Yet I loved creating and maintaining the altar because it was a thing of beauty to me, and from birth or before I seemed to have hungered for beauty.

For my earliest years in school, in most grades, the teachers given to me seemed to find some way to accommodate my insatiable hunger to know and to do. In first grade, the Mary altar and other art-making projects, like creating bulletin boards, were given to me. In second grade, the teacher let me go to the back of the room to read from the books in the two bookcases in the corner when my work was done. I sat on the floor and read in that corner most of the year. I had to read. Like my mother, I had learned to open a book and fall down a rabbit hole into another world.

In third, fourth and fifth grades, I was allowed to read when my work was done. In fifth grade, Sister Mary Arthur saved me with the greatest gift of all — an art haven, created just for me, in a tiny closet with one large window at the back of the room. There she supplied and

frequently replenished the supply of pencils and crayons, pastels and paper, in exchange for which I created bulletin boards for the classroom and the common areas in the hall.

The first real experience of beauty that I recall occurred when I was four, at my grandmother's house, on a miserable day. The family was gathered, and as always when the family gathered, the house and those in it seethed with resentment and sniped and scowled. Whatever the occasion was, whatever celebration we were supposed to be having, I was driven from the house by loneliness and fear. In the middle of the cinder drive of my grandparents' home, I found a glorious small golden flower, growing all alone in the midst of cinders and stone. That flower and its beauty spoke to me. I got down on my haunches and wondered at how such a delicate and lovely thing could grow in such a place. And the flower spoke to my heart. "See, a thing of beauty can grow even in the worst of places," it seemed to say. That flower gave me hope. I raced into the house and grabbed my mother by the hand and begged her to come outside with me to see. She gave me the flower's name — buttercup — then shook me off and went inside. That day, a single buttercup saved me.

As a child, I loved my grandmother's back yard in spring and summertime: lilacs, lilies of the valley, peonies, a raspberry bush along the rusted back fence, butterflies, and delicious smells. It was overgrown and tiny, but that yard fed me with a beauty I didn't have at home.



In second grade, I was barely there, in my body, my mind, my life. I buried myself in books and busyness, anything to keep reality at bay. Once the abuses had begun in earnest, after the rape in my blue dress, I think I spent more time out of my body than in.

“And what did you do, Jeanne, as your father was raping you?” Taylor would ask.

“I went away.”

“What do you mean?”

“In my mind — I just went away.”

“Where did you go?”

For the longest time, I’d say, “I don’t know — just away.”

Dissociation, Taylor called it. A life-saving technique A coping mechanism. Then one time, when he asked me where I went, I remembered a little bit more. Someone came for me. A man, in white robes, who took my hand gently and whispered, “You don’t need to stay here for this, Jeanne. Come with me. Let’s step away.”

So my mind took off, but my poor body had no choice but to stay, and it stored within it every memory of sound, feeling, and pain. “We store our memories in our bodies,” Taylor would say.

As I began to remember my life, as snippets of history were released and came to the surface within me, some were image — the buttercup, grandma’s back yard.... Some were sound — yelling, whispering, and the sucking, panting sounds as the deed was done.

And some were bodily memories — the deep aching in my lower regions that came after (my womb aches even as I pen the words), the slamming of my head against the headboard of my bed, the sweet comfort of chocolate malts — my 30 pieces of silver — with which my father

paid me off, or bought my silence, or assuaged his guilt, for what he did to me. I was my father's whore.

For most of second grade I went away. My teacher had no love or tenderness for me, that I know. But in a year I spent much of in deep fugue states, a waking sleep, she had reason, often, to become frustrated with me. I never paid attention, I never heard her speak my name — I was too far gone.

Over the next three years of school, with Sister Arthur for my teacher, I came to life again — though the abuse continued — because she loved me, recognized the gifts God had given me, and sought ways to nourish them and let them bloom. So I read, I drew, and I excelled academically.

But this was Catholic school, where all around were teachings of a God of judgment and the narrow path required to escape condemnation. I was, as I knew, already damned. Perfect Mary, a woman without sin — what was a girl like me to do with her? I knew I was to blame for my own damnation. I hated my life, but I hated me more. Yet here was Sister Arthur, who saw good in me, who loved me; she was a thread of life to which I clung.



Chapter 10

Better Off Dead

“Time held me green and dying Though I sang in my chains like the sea.”

Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle Into that Good Night"

I was eight when I first expressed thoughts of suicide (As an infant, I had already explored the path, if unsuccessfully). I was in third grade, praised, encouraged and aided by my teacher. Perhaps her love emboldened me.

Something happened at home — I don't know what — but I had been beaten, belt-whipped, and I was in pain. I wrote a letter to my parents. I told them I hated them and hated my life, I wished I had never been born, and I wished I would die and never see them again. So deep was my death wish, apparently, that I marched down the stairs from my room and handed it to them, and then I turned and walked back upstairs and waited. I fully expected another beating.

I don't know how long I waited until Dad opened the door at the bottom of the stairs and summoned me down. I was afraid, but if he killed me at least it would be done. When I came downstairs, my father, filled with righteous anger but remarkably controlled, almost taunting, held my letter out to me, folded up again as it had been when I handed it to him. He held it before my face and said, “Do you know what we're going to do with this?” Mom stood beside and behind him, watchful. I think she, too, was afraid. One wrong word from me and he would lose control. I shook my head.

“We're going to take this to Father Cain and let him see what kind of girl you are to say such terrible things to your parents. We're going to give it to him and let him deal with you.”

Father Cain was a harsh and angry man, much feared. I was terrified, and yet I was resolute. I shrugged.

“Is that what you want me to do?” His voice and face were menacing. “Shall we let Father Cain see what you said to us?”

I nodded. For a moment, maybe, he was stunned, or caught. After a slight hesitation, he said, “Alright then, that’s what we’ll do. We’ll let Father Cain take care of you.” He was shaking with rage.

He reached his long arm up to the highest shelf in the little kitchen where we stood, and he placed the note there carefully, so that the edge of it hung out over the ledge, visible to me down below. “I’m going to leave it right here where you can’t get at it, and, when I’m good and ready, I’m going to give it to Father Cain and let him give it to you.” He grinned his rage. Then he sent me back upstairs, where I spent the rest of the day and night. I always preferred upstairs, when I was alone there.

Over time, my fear of Father Cain won out over my deep and fervent desire for someone to know what was happening to me. On an afternoon when I was home alone (there were many such, as I was so often home sick from school), I climbed onto the high chair and from there to the counter and then on top of the refrigerator to reach the note. I took it down; but, I didn’t destroy it. I took it upstairs and hid it in a small space behind the chimney. Perhaps I, too, wanted to keep the threat alive, at least within myself. It was never mentioned again. It was years before I understood that my father had much more to lose by sharing my words than I did.

One day in school we went to our little library of old, worn books and chose books to read that afternoon. I picked a book of saints. There were two saints I found there that spoke to me deeply but in vastly different ways.

One was Maria Goretti, a saint we’d never been told of by the nuns — a young girl who’d been attacked by a young adult neighbor intent on raping her. (Raping wasn’t explained in the

text, but I knew.) Maria fought him off, refused, tried to talk with him; as I remember it he stabbed her repeatedly, but (so the story went) did not rape her. She forgave him and died with her chastity intact.

This was the first time I saw “my story” in print. I had a whole-body awareness as I read and a brief but utter knowing of my own story of truth, accompanied by waves of shame. She had fought off her rapist; she had died rather than let such a thing happen to her. I had only succumbed — further proof that it really was me who was to blame.

The other saint about whom I read that day was Jeanne D’Arc, St. Joan of Arc, my patron saint. She was a girl who listened to her own inner voices. Left home and family in pursuit of what she believed was right. A being who felt called to a specific mission and purpose and not afraid to wage battle against the evil she could see. How I admired her courage.

And, unlike Mary and Maria and so many other saints, Jeanne D’Arc was flawed: when imprisoned and afraid, she broke down and denied her inner truths. But then she took them back again and claimed them and was redeemed. From then on she not just my patron but my inspiration, and from her I took courage.

One day in fourth grade, Sister Arthur took me aside and said, “Jeanne, God has given you many gifts. He is going to demand great things from you.” I was humbled and terrified by her words and stood speechless before them. She went on: “You will need to listen for God’s call.” I had no idea what she meant, but I knew from the saints that if you followed God’s call, you died.

Chapter 11

Interlude

The white-haired nurse saved me. Mr. Maurer saved me. A buttercup alone in a cinder driveway saved me. Sister Arthur and other teachers saved me. The one who came for me and took me out of my body when I was being violated saved me. Books saved me. Art saved me. John Taylor saved me. So many friends along the way saved me. I would not be alive if not for the ones who saved me along the way. These are the true threads of my story, the threads of life that allowed me to hang on to hope and to know God through love.

Yet, all my life, from earliest memories, I felt like one who stood apart. Apart in family. Apart from peers at school. Apart in all ways. Perhaps my soul never fully occupied my body, or ran from it at every opportunity. Perhaps I was traded at birth for another child. Perhaps I was given one life, but had chosen another. I know only that, always, I felt apart.

These were the motifs of my childhood: Alone at the window in the dark waiting to be found. Alone with secrets and secret expressions of them in my upstairs room. Alone on the playground watching the others at play. Never fitting in, but oh, how at times I wanted to.

I was often sick as a child, lungs weakened in infancy, probably asthmatic, bronchitis several times each winter, home alone, sick, on many school days. How many times I was truly too sick to go to school versus how often my father kept me home to fulfill his own dark needs on his lunch hour I do not know.

Mom worked. Somebody — I don't know who — cared for my little brother and little sisters until Mom came home. Dad would come home on his lunch hour and had me and then, sometimes, he would run to the ice cream store to buy me a chocolate malt.

Pneumonias, bronchitis, wracking coughs, measles, mumps (twice), chicken pox, a

kidney infection at nine or ten — collateral damage from a too large member in a too small frame. It hurt to pee, a long slow burning hurt as the urine stream ended. I waited days to tell my mother out of shame and because she hated taking me to the doctor. For a long time, I was on medicine for the kidney infection and it was days before I could pee without doubling up in pain.

There is so much collateral damage for those who are abused: chronic illnesses; infections; injuries; terrors; insomnia; anxieties; compulsions; self-hate; self-blame; self-punishment; endless shame.

Little things: hot showers, trying to feel clean; mouth aversion and lack of mouth self-care because my half-brother's penis so often went there; inability to swallow at times because of what I swallowed of his; utter aversion to anything touching the back of my throat; a gag reflex so strong that tongue depressors gagged me, pills gagged me, dentists gagged me. Sometimes they still do.

The damages to life and love: terror of men; hatred of men; need for men; reenactment of traumas; failure to trust; fear of love; certainty of betrayal... I could go on and on.

There is no aspect of my being that wasn't harmed by the abuses that occurred to me. There is no end to the remembering, though as the memories float up now, while still surprising at moments, they are more often yellow as old newsprint. I see them, I mark their presence, I consider what brought the memory forward at this time, and then it slides away again.

I avoid and run from this urge to tell my truth, because to do so cannot help but take me there, to these moments I have lived so many times and ever hope to never live again. But tell it I feel I must because I want it to stop. I want the sexual abuse of children to stop everywhere around the globe. I want all violence toward children to stop. I want a world in which children get to possess their own bodies, in which they are protected by law and a worldwide cultural

ethos that treasures them, in which they can feel safe.

I want peace for the children of the world. I want every living survivor of abuse to rise up and speak out against it until it is no more. I hate having to tell this story, but I hope that it will somehow help to save the children of the world, children like me and you who hold so much hurt and harm. And I write it to honor and to thank all of the many persons whose love and kindnesses saved me.

Chapter 12

Evil Close to Home

When I was nine, Maria was kidnapped. She lived a block and a half away from me. She was seven. We had played together only occasionally — there were other kids closer at hand — and only when those we played with most often were unavailable did we venture further afield.

Maria was shy, quiet, sweet, small and beautiful — dark eyes and hair, and somehow remote and inaccessible. Her closest friend was Kathy, who was eight or nine and lived on her street. Kathy was large, ungainly, unattractive. I knew them little, but I knew them.

The first we knew of Maria's disappearance was when someone knocked on our side door on the snowy night she was taken. I was upstairs but not asleep and came down when I heard the knock. I heard men's voices talking to my father, asking him to open the hardware store where he worked so they could get flashlights and lanterns in order to look for her. My parents were keyed up. Mom told my sister and me that Maria had been kidnapped and that Dad was going to help look for her in the cornfields surrounding our town. Meanwhile, women were gathering at the local armory to make sandwiches and coffee for the searchers.

It was about 9 o'clock at night. Dad jammed a two-by-four between the side door and the kitchen wall to keep it from being opened — there was no lock — and we were instructed to lock the front door behind them as they left and to sleep on the couch in the living room to let them in again when they came home, because they couldn't find the key. Dad helped the men. Mom joined the women.

I was awake for a long time after they left, my mind and body alive with that strange combination of adrenalin and terror that overtakes us when disasters strike. Finally I slept, until the knock on the door that caused me to jump up in fear and peek through the door's small

window, to see my mother's face there. I let her in. Dad was out all night, as were most of the men in town. Maria was not found.

No one spoke to us directly about what was going on, so my memories are of things I heard or overheard in conversations that did not include me. People spoke of nothing else. How much of what I heard was rumor and how much was true I do not know.

The search went on for days. The FBI came to town. An artist's rendering of Maria, in color, in a brown coat with a furry collar, missing one shoe, appeared in a Chicago newspaper. One of her shoes had been found near where she had last been seen, standing under a streetlight with her friend Kathy, just after dark. We heard that Kathy told police a man named Johnny had invited them to go for a ride and Kathy had said she'd have to go ask her Mom. She left, and then Maria was gone. By the time they knew she was gone, the thick flakes of falling snow had nearly covered the footprints in the snow. I don't know if Kathy went back to the street corner, or how long it was before she told someone, or until Maria's parents looked for her and couldn't find her.

One evening a few days after Maria was gone, some FBI men came knocking at our door. My half-brother was seventeen. The men searched our home, upstairs, where my half-brother had slept in the anteroom at the top of the stairs and went through everything in his closet. Mom said they were looking for a bright-colored sweater that Maria's friend Kathy had described. They didn't find it. I thought I could tell from her profound agitation that my mother, too, wondered if "Johnny" was her own precious son.

Before the men left they asked Mom what time our Johnny had gotten home the night Maria disappeared. She gave them a time. But he had not come home, not until sometime the next day. I knew by her lie that she suspected him too. She told them he had been in a city

nearby that day, enlisting in the armed services and that the recruiting officer with whom he had enlisted would vouch for him.

Maria's body was found a year later in a forest preserve several hours away. By then she was a skeleton in tattered clothes. By then my half-brother was in the service and gone. After awhile, Maria's parents divorced and moved away. Life in our small town went on, but, for the children especially, it was not the same.

More than forty years later, I was working in a hospital 300 miles from my home town. I went to the kiosk in the hospital lobby one morning to buy my usual large coffee, and the woman who owned the kiosk introduced me to her new employee. The kiosk owner said as she introduced us, "You two are from the same area in Illinois." I had never spoken with her about where I was from, so I asked how she knew. She was a linguist by training, she said, and she recognized where we were from by how we spoke.

I asked the new employee where she was from and she named a small town near mine. When she asked me my town of origin and I named it — we were about the same age — the woman exclaimed, "The kidnapping! That girl! What was her name?" I said, "Maria" and the woman said, "Yes! I was afraid of the dark and had nightmares for a long time after she disappeared." I said I did, too. She asked if they ever found who did it; I said no. I did not say, "But I may know who it was."

Maria's disappearance and death confirmed at a deeper, broader level what I had already learned. The world was a dangerous place for children — and not just in my family, although most of the damage done to children is done at home and seldom makes the news. In my childhood, as far as I'm aware, the abuse of children in their family homes never made the news. But when a child was kidnapped and murdered, then it was worth the telling.

As a child I had no way of knowing that what happened to me happened (and continues to happen) routinely in homes and families and neighborhoods all over the world. I could never have imagined, but I probably would not have been surprised, to know that there would be tourist trades, as there are now in Southeast Asia, where men from the United States and around the world flock to have sex with children as young as I was when my father and sibling abused me.

Not long ago, I was at a work-related meeting with five other women. We were engaged in a team-building exercise that involved sharing an important experience that happened in each of our lives. We had worked together for a brief while and hardly knew each other; we ranged in age from 30 to 60. Only our work brought us together. Four of us at that table revealed as our important experience that we had been sexually abused as children — one by a step-father, two by uncles, and me by father and sibling. The other two women appeared shocked by the revelations. Four of six, by chance, gathered together at work for an unrelated purpose. We don't yet begin to comprehend how widespread this evil is.

Maria changed me. I no longer sat at my window and prayed for rescue from a stranger driving by. Now I knew that strangers were likely to hurt me, too.

The world over, children are victims: beaten, exploited, used, bought and sold, enslaved, blamed, raped, tortured and killed. A six year old beaten to death by his Mom's boyfriend. A six month old admitted to hospital with arms and legs broken in numerous places and shaken so badly that his corneas were ruptured and his brain destroyed. The person who committed that last crime was never discovered, just as the one who killed Maria was never discovered, even though some of us thought we knew.

Chapter 13

Evil Within

My half-brother, Johnny, had sex with me for years. I was not his first and I was far from his last, but I was his for a very long time, when it suited him, when his hunger found no other outlet than me, who was close at hand.

He molested other girls in the neighborhood before he got to me. One that I know of was the daughter of one of my mother's friends. When the friend came to talk to Mom about it, Mom did as she had done to me — she denied it, she closed the door, and she did not speak to or acknowledge her friend again for over a year, until the friend came to her and asked if they could put it behind them and move on.

My aunt Mary had a theory which she shared with me when I was in my early teens. She believed that when he was eight or nine years old, changed from a wonderful, lovable little boy into a monster. It happened, she believed, the day he was hit by a car on his way back to school after coming home for lunch. He was struck as he ran across the main street of town. He received a concussion that day, and my aunt believed it was the concussion that caused the change.

Perhaps it was; but I have wondered for years what happened that day that made him late getting back to school. Was that the day someone first violated him? Did he witness my sister being violated? My mother never spoke of that accident and was angry that my aunt spoke of it to me. Why? Did she know why he ran in front of the car? There's so much I don't know and maybe never will; but, whenever it happened, whether that day or another, my half-brother was indeed a monster by the time he got his hands on me.

The injuries he inflicted run so much deeper than those of my father and are so much

harder to speak of, because my half-brother screwed not just my body but my mind. I was a child so desperately in need of love and Johnny used that need in me to satisfy his own. At times, he even suggested that we might run away together and live where no one would know we were kin.

He was Jekyll and Hyde; all words of love and tenderness on approach, telling me he couldn't help himself, begging me please, please, please to let him do the deed, promising kindness, gentleness, sweetness, but when aroused, delivering mindless animal rage. This pattern, which was set so early and so clearly, made me a co-conspirator because I allowed myself to surrender to his words. As a result, I hated and blamed myself for our relationship for many years. Each time I gave myself to him or allowed him to take me, I was left feeling broken-hearted and utterly betrayed.

Dad threw Johnny out of the house when he was 16; he'd already been thrown out of school for something he said to his art teacher — I never knew what. He took a room in a home on the other end of town and got a job in a factory, then was back home briefly before he joined the service. My parents fought over Johnny so many times. Dad hated him and Mom defended him against all comers. When Dad threw him out, he forbade him ever to “set foot under this roof” again. But it didn't last.

Once at least, while he was in the boarding house, he called Mom. I don't know what they spoke of, but she sent me to him to “do his ironing” — me, alone, in a bedroom with him. Very little ironing got done. Did she know what she was doing? I don't know. Within a short time, he was thrown out of the boarding house, quit or was fired from his job, and came back home. Shortly thereafter, Maria disappeared and Johnny joined the service and left for Texas.

Once, when away, he wrote me a love letter. When my mother read it, she declared it rubbish and threw it away. When he came home once, more than four years later, he brought me

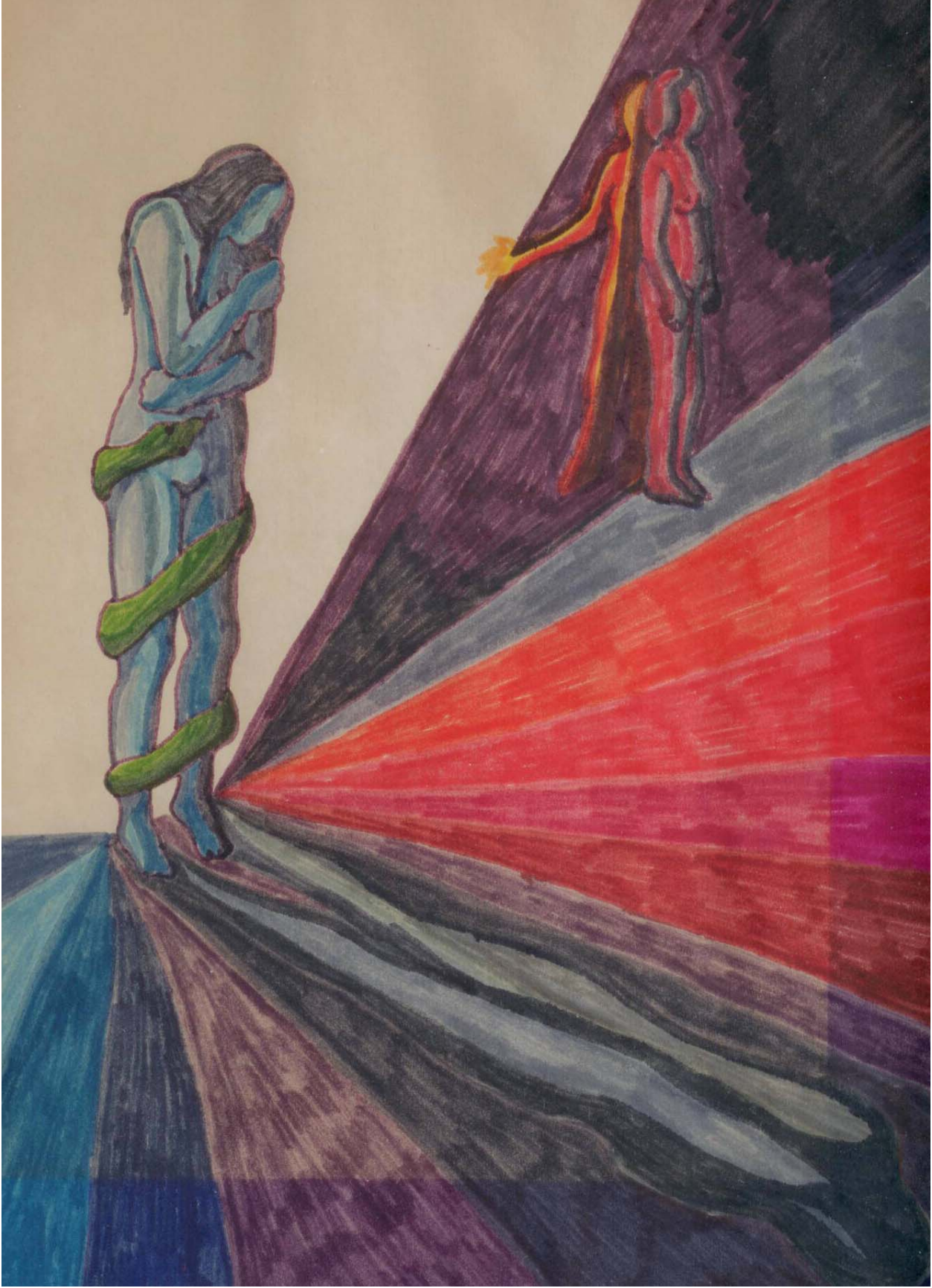
a book. He was 21 or 22 — I was 14. The book was *The Collector*, by John Fowles. It is a novel about a man who kidnaps and keeps a woman. When he gave that book to me, he pronounced it “the best book ever written.” When I read it, I was terrified. I understood then that his hunger was not for love or sex; it was hunger to control. I gave the book to Mom and asked her to read it. She did; I never saw it again.

Home from the service, Johnny drifted again — a factory job, a house he rented with some other guys. One summer day he drove by the house in a big red convertible. I don’t know where he got it. It wasn’t his. I was out front and he stopped to say hello. He was a handsome young man, and the car was handsome, and I was young teenager bored on a summer day. I asked for a ride. He resisted at first — I was not the game he was hunting for that day, but I begged him — please, just a short ride.

He let me in, drove me straight to the home he shared and fucked me. His friends came home and threw open the door to the room just as he was done. Without hesitation, he offered me to them. Two of the three took him up on the offer, the first one rolling me over and entering from behind, the next going for sloppy seconds. The third sat in the room with me for a little while and then told me to put my clothes on. I don’t remember how I got home.

The story doesn’t end there. This dark and damaged soul went on to do harm to so many others. I wonder if all of them, like me, were fooled at first by his smooth talking promises of love.

Abusers and rapists, my half-brother among them, cast very wide nets and harm many. I will never fully recover from the harm he did to me.



Chapter 14

And the Beat Goes on

During the first semester of my freshman year in college, I was gang-raped at a fraternity party. A girl on my floor asked me to go as a blind date with a friend of her boyfriend who was coming in from out of town. I didn't want to do it but finally allowed her to persuade me. When I got to the party, I was offered a glass of punch and soon was unable to think clearly or walk without assistance. I found myself being led out of the party and into a large dark room filled with mattresses separated from each other by sheets hanging from the ceiling. There I lay for I don't know how long, coming to consciousness at moments to find yet another dark figure on top of me. When I finally awoke, the house was still. I stumbled into my clothes, down some stairs and out the door, and began the long walk home.

As I walked, in a daze, half-conscious, I suddenly was seven years old again and was walking back from the corn field to our apartment home. By the time I got back to my dorm, it was almost dawn. The doors had been unlocked for those who had early morning jobs. I crept into my room where my roommate was sleeping, got a towel and robe and walked down the hall to the bathroom. I took a very long hot shower. I stood under that water until I could stand no longer, then I went back to my room and fell into bed. I was awakened sometime in the early afternoon by a knock at the door. It was the girl who had persuaded me to go to the party. She asked if I was okay. I said, "I was raped last night." She said, "Oh," and then left the room. I went back to sleep.

A month or so later, in late November, a high school classmate of mine who was attending the same university came to see me. He said he needed to talk. We were not good friends but I had always tried to be kind to him during our high school years when he was not a

popular boy and was the butt of many jokes.

We found a quiet place in one of the lounges of the dorm and he confessed to me that, as part of his fraternity initiation, he had been made to join in the gang-rape of a girl. I angrily asked him why he was telling this to me. He answered that he had to tell someone and that he was seeking forgiveness. I assured him he would get no forgiveness from me. He asked me what he should do and I told him he would have to figure that out for himself. At the time, it didn't occur to me that perhaps the one he had gang-raped was me. I'll never know for sure, because he went home on Christmas break a week and hung himself from a rafter in his family home. It is not only the victims who are victimized by cultures of abuse. When I learned of his death, I was so sorry I hadn't been kinder just one more time.

Chapter 15

This Story Never Ends

Recently I came across a book published in 1988 called *Journeys by Heart* by Rita Nakashima Brock. I want to share three short passages.

“In upholding as normative the patriarchal family and its structures, Christianity has ignored the suffering of women and children at its very center and has not understood the implications of patriarchy for those who live within such structures. In the United States suicide is the second most common form of death among teenagers; one in every five children grows up in poverty; one in every three women will be raped as an adult, one in every four daughters and one in every eight sons are molested by the age of eighteen; and every thirty-nine seconds a woman is battered in her own home.” (3)

Of course these numbers are not the same today, but the essential reality of this concise statement of the pain of life for women and children has not changed.

Brock goes on to argue that sin is neither “original” nor inevitable, but rather it is a “symptom of the unavoidably relational nature of human existence through which we come to be damaged and damage others.” (7) “Sin is not something to be punished, but something to be healed,” she states.

It is healing, not revenge, that I am seeking in sharing this story — healing for perpetrators and survivors alike. I am seeking, and I beg you to seek with me, nothing less than the healing of the human species of all the brokenness that has been done to us and that we have done in relationship with others.

In spite of everything, I am alive and well. In spite of all the harm done to me, I learned to love. I found my way to healthy human relationships. I have lived a creative and productive

life. If I can, so can we all. If I can change my story, so can you change yours, and so can humanity change this tragic human story.

One last passage from Rita Brock: “That we exist at all is a sign that the destructive relationships of our lives have not been final and that we have the responsibility of acknowledging our connectedness to others and our commitment to the creation of right relationships.” (7)

The costs to human societies of abusive relationships are legion: they include mental illness and years of therapy (for the lucky) at untold monetary costs; physical, emotional, and psychological damages that impair the lives of most of the human beings in existence; lost dreams, broken relationships, and growing numbers of the damaged with every generation, because many of those who have been harmed will harm others. Alcoholism, drug addictions, criminal lives — these, too, are tied directly to the damage done by abuse.

Please join me in a “commitment to right relationships” in our families, neighborhoods, communities and world. Every child is my child and yours. Every woman is my mother and your mother. Every man and woman who has harmed another is likewise my sister and my brother. I don’t have to forgive what they have done, but I do have to seek their healing, as well as my own. We are one. We must find a way to heal our own. No story ever ends, but every story can be changed. Let’s change this one.

God bless the child.