

## A QUESTION OF CHILD ABUSE

I apologize for thus revealing myself to you; but in my opinion it is more useful to speak of what one has experienced than to pretend to a knowledge that is entirely impersonal, an observation with no observer. In fact, there is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography.--Paul Valery

This autobiographical essay aims to contribute to the current discussion on sexual abuse in childhood, first, by introducing a different kind of testimony, a different voice from the mostly female ones that, for entirely justifiable reasons, have been heard so far; second, by recording an experience that might broaden views of the concept, allowing it to be seen as a phenomenon affecting males as well as females and involving more than physical violation. This is a memoir from the other sex, a memoir about something rarely admitted, at least in print.

The overwhelming consensus among researchers now is that girls are, by a considerable margin (about one out of five girls as opposed to one out of eleven boys), the most frequent victims of child sexual abuse, and that the vast majority of the offenders (against children of both sexes) are men. Nearly all books about sexual abuse in childhood are written using the pronoun "she" to refer to the victim and "he" to refer to the perpetrator. And nearly all those who write about the experience of having been sexually abused as children are women. Men are the abusers; their victims mostly girls. "Child sexual abuse is," as one study puts it, "a phenomenon connected with the sexuality of men." As for sexual encounters between mothers and sons, statistics claim they are very rare, of negligible importance in the overall picture of the phenomenon.

My intention here is less to take issue with this general picture (except perhaps the last part of it), than to complicate it somewhat by introducing a male voice into the discussion. The standard account of child sexual abuse tells only part of the story, perhaps the greatest part, but a part nevertheless. There are probably many reasons for this partiality, mostly having to do with the cultural construction of gender: boys are active, girls are passive; real men don't reveal themselves; your relationship with your mother was too close, you must be gay, and so on. But the reasons are too complex to go into in the story I want to tell. The picture is even more troubling, I think, than is generally believed.

Indeed, what is it a picture of? What do we mean when we talk about child sexual abuse? Usually something that involves physical violation. But is that the only kind of exploitation? And what about the aftermath? What about the silence and denial that usually follow? These are questions I hope to explore in the following story--my own. I tell it in the hope of provoking fresh thinking on the subject, keeping in mind Valery's injunction that "it is more useful to speak of what one has experienced than to pretend to a knowledge that is entirely impersonal, an observation with no observer." Whether this story turns out to be about "child sexual abuse" is up to the reader to decide. In my opinion, such categories are ultimately irrelevant compared to the experience itself. And that is what I would like to give a sense of here, before turning to more conceptual issues at the end.

As I lay in the light of the half-open door waiting for my mother to come down the hall from the room where she and my father slept, no longer now to tuck me in and kiss me good night (as in Proust's long awaited good-night kiss), but to get into the bed with me and sleep with me for the rest of the night, I would wonder to myself whether it would not have been better if I had been born a girl. I would even try to imagine that I had a girl's name, as if a new name would work some sort of magical transformation, so that I would not have to worry about that thing of mine, such as it was, and not only that thing but all of my urges, to touch and be touched, to explore every part of her body, especially the hairy part down below. I do not know whether being a girl would have actually helped, but it seemed to my child's imagination as if it might at the time and in the strange predicament I was in, having apparently, and without quite knowing how, become the one my mother preferred to sleep with. Somehow, I felt, it would have been easier with another kind of body, one more like hers, because what was happening was, I knew, not really supposed to be happening, and very dangerous, even though I yearned for it every night, had become completely addicted to it, and could hardly have imagined myself living without it. But by the time she slipped into bed with me, her six-year-old son, all those thoughts vanished in the sheer pleasure of having her body next to mine.

I wrote that paragraph six months ago, about forty-five years after the events it begins to record took place. This was the first time I had actually tried to put the events down on paper. But the memory of them has been with me for years, since my early twenties (I am fifty now)--since the rather misty February morning in Boston when they came back, more or less all at once and more or less all of a piece as I walked west from the Common down the grassy median strip that separates the two sides of Commonwealth Avenue. And they had been with me for years before that in the form of what I had taken to be a large black lump that lived inside of me, or that I felt as a lump which contained some evil poison I was afraid to let out. I think I would have no trouble even now locating the spot on the median strip of Commonwealth Avenue where they emerged out of that darkness, and I vividly recall how more or less involuntarily they came back, starting with the final brutal night, my father's footsteps down the hall, his pulling my sleeping mother out of what had become our bed, and the sheer terror after it was over, the emptiness of the bed from which she had been pulled and my uncontrollable sobs. I recall how dumbstruck I was as I watched those memories come out, almost perfectly intact, after what seemed at the time like so many years, the almost physical excitement ! felt as that whole portion of my childhood continued, with just a little renewed pressure, to unfold.

I thought then that I had been saved, delivered from a kind of bondage. Little did I realize that it takes more than memory, more than the recovery of the past to make that sort of deliverance possible. Lately, though, I've had a strange sensation, the reverse of that often claimed by amputees, who say they can feel sensation where the limb they have lost used to be, but when they reach down to touch it find nothing there. I've found myself fantasizing that I was missing a limb, but when I reach down in my fantasy I discover it is there.

As far as I can determine with any degree of accuracy the events I will relate here took place around 1948, three years after my father's return home from the Pacific, where he had served in the Navy for most of the war. During that time, except for his leaves and reassignments (Newport, Brooklyn), my mother and I lived with my maternal grandparents in an enormous establishment, staffed mostly by "colored" servants and surrounded by equally enormous establishments inhabited by various siblings and cousins and their families, not far from the house where I was to grow up and where what I am about to tell took place. That house, a

barn converted after the war, was located on property that had been in my father's family since the end of the nineteenth century. In fact, it was only a few hundred yards from the "big house" where he had been born, in what was then considered the country (only a few miles from "downtown"). Soon, my father's brother and sister and their families would move into homes on the same property, one on either side, though far enough away or separated by enough trees so as to be barely visible from our house. Moving there after my father's return from the war was like moving from one family compound into another, admittedly on a somewhat smaller scale.

When my parents married in 1940, on what was to be the eve of the war, my mother was twenty-six and my father twenty-eight. Each of them had come from "established" local families, although each of those families was established in slightly different ways. My mother's was Catholic (in a city on the eastern seaboard where that was connected with social status) and quite wealthy; my father's Episcopalian (Quaker in the nineteenth century) and of relatively more modest pretensions. The circle of friends my parents grew up and went to school with also came from established families and later, as was the custom in that city, after the usual round of coming-out parties and other social rituals, married one another and settled there. My mother and father married rather later than the rest, were among the last to pair off, as it were. Indeed, as my father once put it, they married because they were practically the only two left. I was born in March of 1942, and shortly afterward, certainly by the following year, my father had left for the Pacific and my mother and I had moved in with my grandparents to wait for his return.

I am reasonably certain that what I am going to describe took place in 1948 because the morning after it was all over I remember my father driving me to school to attend what I am almost positive was the first grade (or sixth age, as it was called at the private school I attended). This I remember so vividly because he drove in absolute silence, without uttering a word--a silence that continued, except for one instant of acknowledgment on my mother's part many years later in the middle of a wild family quarrel ("I know. I know," she moved her mouth without making a sound when I briefly alluded to the events), all of my well-bred and in so many respects extremely kind parents' lives. I suppose I am writing this in order to break that silence, because the denial represented by it strikes me as something like a disease, a disease for which the only hope of a cure is in speaking, in making public what has been hidden for so long.

There is, of course, a tradition of this sort of writing, beginning perhaps with Rousseau. But it is with Dickens's contribution to this tradition that I feel the greatest affinity, and in particular, with his account of his parents' silence after the childhood trauma he relates in the fragmentary autobiography that later formed the basis of *David Copperfield*. (Is one reason for that book's enormous power over some of its readers their unconscious recognition of experiences similar to their own?) After his father was thrown into prison for debt when Dickens was nine, his parents accepted an offer from a cousin of the family and allowed him to work in a factory where pots were filled with a blacking preparation for shoes. Warrens Blacking, 30 Strand, was located in one of the most wretched sections of London, and Dickens's only companions were "poor little drudges" like himself, a fate he believed he would never escape. "It is wonderful how I could have been so easily cast away at that age," Dickens recalls his sense of abandonment, "the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless." And he concludes by remarking on his parents' silence after it was all over, after his father had been released from prison: "From that hour until this at which I write, no word of that part of my childhood which I have gladly brought to a close, has passed my lips to any

human being. . . . From that hour until this, my father and mother have been stricken dumb upon it. I have never heard the least allusion to it, however far off and remote, from either of them." Writing, in other words, had become the only means of healing the wound inflicted by his parents' silence, the wound inflicted by having been for the first time forced into his own solitude and left there, even after he was reunited with his parents, without anyone to talk to.

I am not sure how it started. In many ways, the scenario seems to have been the reverse of the one Proust describes at the opening of *Remembrance of Things Past*. There, it was Marcel's mother who resisted her sons' entreaties for one last good-night kiss, in order to accustom him to a more disciplined regime. And it was his father (with disastrous results for Marcel's character: "a black date in the calendar" of his life) who told his wife to "stay beside [her son] for the rest of the night," to sleep in the bed next to his in order to soothe his agitated nerves. In my own case, it was the reverse. It was my mother who sought me out.

Perhaps not initially. I may have started it by asking her to keep me company until I went to sleep. I can certainly identify with all of Marcel's anguish, that yearning, so shameful in boys, for a mother's comfort at bedtime. But before I knew it, a strange, almost uncanny reversal had begun to take place, one that was initially the cause of some unanticipated satisfaction, even intense pleasure on my part. She had started initiating visits to my bed on her own, and not just to keep me company-- for more often than not (at least at the beginning, before I began to stay awake in excited anticipation of her visits) I would already be asleep--but, as it turned out, so that I could keep her company for the rest of the night. Often, especially at the beginning, she would be upset when she got into bed with me. But after a while, she simply seemed to come as a matter of course, as if sleeping with me was the natural thing to do, and I learned to expect her arrival at about the same time every night.

I do not know the circumstances of this change in my mother's behavior, but they can be imagined. As far as I was aware at the time, my parents were perfectly happy. That was certainly the official story, as it is in most households, one that no six-year-old is in any position to disbelieve, and certainly not an only child as I was at the time. But the war, the separations it entailed, which had required my mother's return with me to her parents' house, the essentially Victorian nature of both my parents' upbringings (typical of their class at the time), and various other inevitable sources of incompatibility (religious background, temperament): all must have produced some substantial strains, strains that drove my mother to the conclusion (for how long a period I do not remember: at least two or three weeks) that it would be better for her to sleep with her son than with her husband.

In any case, she seemed to need it, seemed to need whatever affection I could give her. I think I can remember my feelings at the time these visits began. I was thrilled, of course, to have my mother in bed with me for the whole night, or for as much of as I could remember before I went to sleep. But I think I can also remember feeling as if I were on the verge of something important, something determinative. (In a strange and thoroughly unexpected way, this has turned out to be true. At least it has helped shape the course of my life, right down to this moment of writing.) I was, after all, being asked, if not directly at least indirectly, to perform an important service, to make my mother feel good, as I put it to myself. And that's the way I put it to her as well: "What makes you feel good? If I rub here, or here?" That's a reasonably large responsibility for a six-year-old, but at first I felt up to it, felt flattered about the attention I was being asked to give, that I was being asked to perform such an adult role. So, in addition to the sheer pleasure of having my mother's body next to mine, of feeling her warmth, and smelling her smell (especially the smell of her hair), I felt a certain urgency--

that a lot depended on what I did, and that if I did it well, everything might be alright. I think that is what I thought, initially at least, until things got complicated, as can be imagined they inevitably might under such circumstances.

I would like to try to describe what it feels like for a six-year-old boy to lie next to his mother in a situation of such relative intimacy all night. My mother wore a long, ankle-length nightgown made out of some sheer material, satin or some sort of satiny synthetic that women wore in the late forties. It was tightly fitting, and you could see through it, especially if it was illuminated from behind as it often was in the light of the door, could see the dark V of her pubic hair, the hairs themselves, and the dark spots of her nipples. When my mother got into bed on those nights she would almost invariably lie with her back to me, despite all of my mostly self-interested efforts to coax her to do otherwise, a gesture, I suppose, of modesty, but one that came to take on a fuller significance as time went on, a significance of a most profound ambivalence. At thirty-four, she was tall and quite slender, with smallish breasts and incredibly soft skin. Despite the difference in our sizes, we seemed to fit together pretty well in the traditional spoon position as I endeavored to do what I could to make her happy. It is not difficult for me to recall but quite difficult to describe what this felt like at the time: the unbelievable softness of my mother's skin, especially around the nape of her neck, the smell and the warmth I have already mentioned, the curve of her thighs underneath her nightgown. All this is well understood by lovers and people whose job it is to sell products. But at the age of six, and under such circumstances as I have tried to describe, such closeness was utterly engulfing in its immediacy, engulfing and fantastically exciting. That's why, once the repression is lifted, it is not difficult to recall (if "recall" is even the right word); like Proust's involuntary memory, there are no intellectual structures to mediate the sensations. They are simply, overwhelmingly there, and they remain part of your body forever, a burden as well as a blessing.

That is the way things began--innocently, I suppose it could be said. At least I don't believe that my mother intended any harm. She was lonely, needed love, especially love that did not require any reciprocation (unlike the usual love between husbands and wives). Her world was profoundly enclosed, by the nature of the upbringing she had received (upper-class, Catholic), by her economic status (privileged, but totally dependent upon her husband), by the house she inhabited (separate and isolated, barely another light to be seen), by the round of her daily life (what you would expect of a young matron in the late forties: the carpool, the garden club, and some initial forays into watercolors). To whom else could she turn under the circumstances, the circumstances of those nights that were probably taking place in comparable bedrooms between comparable husbands and wives all over America at the time? To whom else could she turn for love but to her son?

At first, I did not know exactly what was happening, exactly what was wrong. My most urgent need was to try to find out what would make my mother feel better, make her unhappiness go away. I knew what made me feel better when I was unhappy: expressions of concern, gentle stroking, expressions of love. On occasions when I needed it, my father would soothe me to sleep by rubbing my back and my buttocks (which was also erotically very stimulating). I tried the same thing. I would rub my mother's back until she fell asleep, or until I fell asleep. I would pass my hand down over her buttocks, trying to use the same gentle stroking motion my father used with me, occasionally passing it between her buttocks to see what that felt like, to see how she would respond. Partly because her back was turned, I could never tell when she was asleep or just pretending to be asleep. I could never really tell what was going on in her mind.

The room we were in, one of several furnished bedrooms in the house, was only ten or fifteen steps away from my parents' bedroom. It had two windows that faced south, added no doubt when the house was converted from its original purpose, and the head of the bed was against the wall opposite those windows. The door from the hall was on the right side of the bed as you faced the windows. On the left was a closet and some sort of dresser or chair. For some reason, my mother would always slip into the left side of the bed when she came in. Pretty soon, I knew to wait for her on the side near the door, which was usually half-open, letting in the light from the hallway. This meant that I could see her in her nightgown in the doorway when she came in, could see the V of her pubic hair and the rest of her slender body through the nightgown. It also meant that when she got into bed with her back to me I too would have to turn over on my left side to face her, even though it was her back that I was facing. It was very frustrating not to be able to see her face, although I sometimes saw it when she rolled over in her sleep. But by that time I would be up a lot of the night, waiting for her to roll over, waiting for her to respond in some way. Because by that time I had discovered that lying next to my mother in bed, feeling her warmth and stroking her back and her buttocks the way I did, had begun to arouse me sexually, although I certainly wouldn't then have defined it in that way. And I had begun to wish that if I could be such a comfort to her, she might be one to me, although I had no idea what form that might take.

I'm not sure how long it took to reach that point in the sequence of events. Nor do I know how aware my mother was of what was beginning to take place. I do not think that she ever intended to arouse me sexually. In fact, I think she would have been shocked to discover how aroused I was. Her culture was strictly Victorian, pre-Freudian, and everything else of that sort: Catholic, convent-school, and deeply conservative both socially and politically. But the fact is that it didn't take long under the circumstances of our nights together for me to become almost unbearably excited by being so intimately in bed with her, by exploring her body with my hands (or as much of it as I could with her back to me), feeling her warmth and her smell. Sometimes my penis would be so stiff from rubbing against her that I was afraid it would break off, literally like a stick. It became my enemy, because however much I wanted to hold it down, to keep it under control, it would always get hard as soon as she slipped into bed with me. And it would stay hard until I managed to go to sleep, which usually took a long time by now, my excitement and frustration were so great. Again, what my mother knew of all this I have no idea. It is difficult for me to imagine that she was not aware of my excitement, of how aroused I was. But then the difference in our sizes was so great, my penis, even when erect, was at that age so small, that she may very well not have been, or only partially aware. Whatever the truth of the situation, I certainly kept my mouth shut and never complained at the time, although there were moments when I could hardly contain myself with the desire to be touched as well.

It was at about this time that I began to anticipate my mother's coming down the hall with a combination of the most intense longing and an almost equally intense dread. I had no thought of my father. For the time being, he had ceased to exist. I was entirely focused on my mother, and I wanted her next to me, wanted to know more of her body, yet I knew that my longing was bound to be frustrated, that her back would always be turned (unless by some miracle she accidentally rolled over in her sleep), and that I would always be left with my own desires, disorganized as they were, unsatisfied. That is when I began to wish I had been born a girl. That way, I thought, I could have had all the closeness I wanted and none of the pain that my penis brought me, the pain and the shame, the fear of its being snapped off. It is difficult to describe the emotions here. I loved my mother, and I could not do without her, yet

I was beginning to hate her as well, or rather to hate myself for what was beginning to happen between us.

One moment in all this stands out with special clarity for me. I had become increasingly shameless in my efforts to explore with my hands and fingers what were for me the secret parts of my mother's body. Her vagina was particularly mysterious to me, and I desperately wanted to touch it, to see what it felt like, to see if she would permit me to touch that part of her. She seemed to like it when I passed my fingers between her buttocks, or at least she never protested, but would lie there quite still letting me do what I wanted. One night, thinking that I might just be able to explore further, I waited until I believed she had gone to sleep, waited what seemed like an incredibly long time in a heightened state of anticipation. I knew that what I was about to do was taboo- it was one reason my mother always had her back to me--but I had to do it, had to touch her there to see what it was like. After an unbearable wait, I summoned up all of my courage and began cautiously to move my hand toward the place about which I had such curiosity. As I approached it, pausing for long periods to see if there was any change in her breathing, she gave a sudden shake and said sleepily, "No, I'm sorry. You can't touch me there. That place is saved for your father."

I don't recall exactly what I replied to this expression of marital propriety. Something like: "Is it still okay to touch everywhere else?" I was startled, chastened. But there was no alternative except to accept the logic, and I was certainly in no position, physically or otherwise, to argue with her, despite the fact that she came down the hall to sleep with me every night and seemed to like all the other things I did. Her words, however, had the effect of reminding me that some things were still out of bounds, that I was still, despite the role I was being asked to play, a child, and that, wherever he was, my father was still the one in control.

The end came without any warning. One night--and again I have no idea how long after it all began--I awoke suddenly to the pounding of my father's feet coming down the hall. I did not register it then as the sound of my father's feet, just as some angry pounding, a frightening noise. I believe that my mother gave a cry as she awoke. I don't remember her words. I only remember the sudden and sharp terror of that moment. Something awful was about to happen. Then the door slammed open in the dark, and there was a chaotic struggle in the bed as my father, in his rage, began to pull my mother out from under the covers.

The rest is difficult to reconstruct. There must be a form of trauma that produces what can only be described as a kind of out-of-body experience, a trauma so total that one is forced, in order to preserve oneself, to view what is going on around one as if one were a detached spectator. That is not to say that I was not terrified at what was happening to my mother, at what might happen to me, terrified and I suppose screaming as loud as I could, although I don't recall that. I only recall what it was like when it was over, when my father had pulled my mother, screaming, down the hall to their bedroom. I recall, as if they had been someone else's, how long my sobs lasted (really, until I finally went to sleep again several hours later). I recall lying across the bed in a chaos of sheets and blankets, but mostly on the left side now, on the side where the closet door was (which for some reason was open). I recall the sheer size of the bed with my mother gone, and trying to find her again, and scared to death of what he might do to her, what he might do to me. But most of all I recall that I seemed to experience all this as if I were somehow outside of myself as well as in, as if I were viewing it all from some position two or three feet above my body as well as experiencing what was going on from within. I think that is because, on some more or less physiological level, I was

saying to myself, "You must remember this. You cannot forget this." It seemed, under the circumstances, like the only way to survive.

I am not sure how I woke up the next morning, or what I was thinking about as I put on my clothes to go downstairs for breakfast. I think I must have wondered what I would find down there, whether my mother and father would be there at all, or, if they were, how I should behave. I was, needless to say, terrified of my father, of what he might still do to me and of what he might have done to her after they left the bedroom. But children of my age at the time don't have many options. I had to have breakfast, and I had to be driven to school. That's what happened every morning, and if I was late, my father would be even angrier than he must already have been. To make him late for work was the worst thing that could be done.

I haven't said much about my father up to now because, until the last night, he was irrelevant to me at the time. My father, having married into a large and powerful family, a family almost obsessively preoccupied with itself, had a respectable but fairly modest job in the trust department of a downtown bank. Jobs were hard to come by after the war was over. In terms of status and income he could not offer my mother what she might have reasonably expected, given the more affluent nature of her background (although by any normal standards his left nothing to be desired). This must have been humiliating. Indeed, I know it was humiliating to him. On the other hand, he was the husband, and therefore due all the rights and privileges appurtenant thereunto in the domestic ideology of the day. That there was a power struggle going on between my parents, I have absolutely no doubt. He was the official master of the house (especially since the house was on his property, flanked by the houses of his brother and his sister). Yet my mother had other forms of control at her disposal, not only her family and her social standing, but her relationship with me and everything that relationship represented to her, including our life together while he was away in the Pacific. In short, I became a major piece in that struggle. But why my father allowed my mother to sleep with me for as long as she did I will never fully understand. Perhaps he pretended to himself that it was no concern of his, that I was after all hers, or perhaps he was simply afraid that he would lose in the competition between husband and son.

But at the time there was one thing of which I was certain: if she was downstairs, my mother would find some way to help me. She would be in the kitchen making breakfast while my father would be in the dining room sitting at the end of the table, his back to the window and his chair turned slightly sideways, reading the paper and having his juice. His legs would be crossed, and he would be wiggling his right foot impatiently as he read. I would go in through the kitchen, and she would turn from whatever she was doing and put her arms around me and tell me how to act. She often did that when he was in a bad mood. This morning I was certain that he would be in a very bad mood, but she would help me, I was sure, tell me what to say, or whether I should say anything at all.

When I opened the door to the kitchen from the downstairs hall my mother was in the process of fixing my father's breakfast. She was fully dressed in some kind of print skirt and a blouse that set off her slender figure in the style of the late forties. At first, I was overjoyed to see that she was alive, and a wave of relief spread over me. It was going to be alright. But when she turned toward me what struck me almost immediately was how little emotion she showed, how deliberately expressionless her face was. She was obviously very tired, even inwardly disturbed. But as I searched for some trace of acknowledgment of what had taken place, I could find none, only a blank. I remember that we stood that way facing one another several feet apart--not even close enough to touch--for some seconds. It seemed like much

longer, forever, in fact, as I searched her face in the expectation of some sign of sympathy and affection. But none appeared, or only a look that I interpreted as "I can't." Perhaps she was following directions given by my father before they came down. In any case, after what felt like an eternity, she simply pointed in the direction of the dining room door, moving her lips silently to indicate that I should go in, and returned to her tasks, fixing my father's breakfast and now the cereal I would be eating while the three of us sat in silence at the table.

At the end of his narrative, Dickens recalls that after his release from forced labor in the blacking factory on account of a quarrel between his father and the cousin who had arranged for the job, his mother "set herself to accommodate the quarrel" so that her son could go back to work, but his father would not allow it and insisted that he go to school. "I do not write resentfully or angrily," Dickens explains, "for I know how all these things have worked together to make me what I am: but I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back." I may have forgotten this moment in my life temporarily--until my early twenties--but having remembered my mother's silence at that time, I cannot forget it again, will not forget it as long as I live. For it was in that moment of refusal on her part that I became conscious that I was genuinely on my own. But more than that--on my own in a world (small, to be sure) of people in whom it had just begun to dawn on me I could put no real trust. It was as if a connection had been severed. My parents seemed suddenly distant figures, and I was, to all intents and purposes, by myself.

My father was sitting at the end of the table with his back to the window when I walked into the dining room. I don't recall whether he had his legs crossed or whether he was reading the newspaper. Needless to say, as social situations go, it was an awkward one: a man having breakfast with his six-year-old son who has been spending every night for the past several weeks or so with his wife, the son's mother, a man who the night before had come pounding down the hall and violently dragged his wife out of his son's bed in an effort to reclaim her. Not conducive to breakfast-table small talk. We ate in silence. After a while, my mother joined us, and the three of us ate in silence, until my father got up to have his bowel movement in preparation for going to work and I was ready to be driven to school.

Being in the car alone with my father was even more awkward. I recall uncomfortably sitting in the seat beside him as we moved down the driveway from our house, peering over the dashboard of his late model Ford (a car he bought every two years in those days) and wondering what he might say or do, or whether I should say something to break the ice. It was raining, if I recall, or at least grey. But the silence remained unbroken for the whole ten-minute drive, until he let me off at school and headed downtown for another day at work.

The story I have told here raises several conceptual issues. Leaving aside the question of the truthfulness of my own memories, whether I have made all this up or not (I haven't), the first, obviously, is whether the episode I have described here can be said to constitute child sexual abuse at all, and if so, what implications that would have for our conception of the phenomenon, or, if not, what kind of phenomenon it would constitute and what our attitude toward such a phenomenon ought to be. Needless to say, I am convinced (or otherwise I would not make this story public) that what I experienced as a boy of six is not unique, that it has happened, that it happens, in different forms of course, to others, and perhaps very many others at that. I have no empirical evidence upon which to base this conviction, except that of my own experience and the intuition that experience has given me. Further evidence may come later, in the form of other narratives (the best kind of data, in my opinion). But the question remains: what sort of phenomenon is what I have described and how should it be

treated? Does the way we understand such events make a difference in their consequences, consequences that can be devastating not just to the person to whom they happen to but to others as well?

Standard accounts of child sexual abuse based on the model of the adult-male-as-perpetrator and the female (or male) child-as-victim generally involve some form of physical transgression, usually some kind of active fondling or penetration, with the victim in the role of a relatively passive recipient. That clearly was not true in my case. In fact, if anything, the standard roles were reversed. I was the active party, while my mother's role was almost completely passive (lying with her back toward me, letting me make her feel better, etc.). In fact, you could almost say that what went on in that bed between us constituted a grotesque parody of the sexual roles men and women were (still are?) supposed to play (male-as-active/female-as-passive), except that, for obvious reasons, the scenario never led anywhere, always ended, from my perspective at any rate, in complete frustration.

Be that as it may, however, the question remains: were the roles we played, mine active, hers passive, really as straightforward and unambiguous as all that? In what sense of the word active can a six-year-old boy's actions of this sort, touching, stroking, etc., be described? And under what circumstances is passivity, not appearing to do anything, just lying there, actually a kind of activity, involving moral and psychological consequences? I did not, after all, choose to be in the position I was in, except to the extent that initially at least my mother's spending the night with me fulfilled every oedipal fantasy I could possibly have had (at a time, no less, when I was just getting them under control) and gave me enormous pleasure as well. Crucially, however, it was her actions, coming down the hall, slipping into bed, even just lying there, that determined mine: trying to act as a substitute for my father, playing the role of an adult while still inhabiting a six-year-old boy's body. Does this constitute abuse? Clearly, not in any active sense. But given the physiological and psychological impact of such actions upon the developmental process, the damage they inflict upon the growing child, it constitutes some form of abuse, however passively constituted, some form of the use of a child to satisfy adult needs. Call it what you will, the result is the same: pain that lasts for a very long time.

But maybe the most damaging form of abuse (if that is the word to use) is silence, and the denial that is implicit in it. I mean the denial not only of what happened but of the person it happened to. Basically, as I see it, both my mother's refusal to talk to me the morning after it was all over, as well as both my parents' subsequent silence on the matter stemmed from the mistaken notion that what had happened would somehow go away, that my memory of what had happened would only be temporary and that could give them license to forget as well. Initially, I suppose it could be said that they were right. Through a mechanism of repression I shall never fully understand, but that made it possible for me to continue living my life, I did forget what had happened. I did what most children are forced to do; I joined the conspiracy of silence and denial. What other option, after all, was there if I wanted to continue to live under the same roof with my parents, a matter in which as a six-year-old I had no choice? Such a response, needless to say, is a matter of self-defense (literally) and involves an attempt on the child's part to try to restore the family, but it can produce all sorts of bad side-effects as well that take years to unravel- in my own case, the painful atrophying of my own desires, or at least my ability to give them expression. That I did eventually remember was clearly not part of the bargain. That I have written this, even less so. But then even the most atrophied parts of an organism have been known to recover, with appropriate nourishment and care.

And then there is the related question of responsibility, of who was responsible for what took (or didn't take) place in that bedroom, in that kitchen, and even in that car forty-five years ago, the question of agency. I have tried to sketch a context for those events, to suggest that they did not take place in a vacuum but were the product of social and historical forces many of which were beyond the control of any of the agents in the action (a small action, to be sure, in comparison with other events that were taking place elsewhere in the world). But this approach raises some rather difficult ethical and philosophical issues. To what extent were my mother's actions, her choice to sleep with me in preference to my father, determined by circumstances--social, economic, psychological--over which she had little or no control? And what about my father's role in all this? What part did he play in the scenario that unfolded, and how did that part shape the roles assumed by the other actors? These are tricky questions and ultimately the answers are unknowable. But at least some attempt should be made to find some answers, if only to try to get some purchase on their unknowability.

From one perspective, of course, and even without the benefit of Freud's Three Essays on Sexuality or whatever other material might have been available to her, my mother should have known better than to have allowed the situation to develop as it did. It doesn't take a genius to recognize that there is something wrong when you seem to prefer your healthy six-year-old son to your husband as a partner to spend the night with, especially when you are doing so under the latter's nose, so to speak (unless, of course, you are unconsciously trying to humiliate him, which may, as I have already suggested, have been a factor). And even if my mother, as is perfectly conceivable, given her general innocence in those matters, had not been able to recognize the physical manifestations of her son's erotically charged condition, she should have been able to recognize that something was not right about the plight into which she was placing him, to act as a substitute for his father. Whether or not one wishes to call her behavior seductive is beside the point. The point is that it involved the emotional and physical exploitation of her child; it involved using him to satisfy her own emotional and physical needs. This may not have been something for which she might have been found criminally guilty (the law is too crude an instrument to regulate this kind of behavior), but it was wrong nevertheless, behavior that no amount of passivity, no claims not to have been better informed can mask.

On the other hand, and to balance this judgment, there is no question that my mother, too, was a victim- of her mother's very limited ability to show affection, partly required by the enormous distance thought appropriate between parents and children when she was growing up; of her father's good-natured but utterly ineffectual passivity; of a thoroughly restrictive upbringing at the hands of Teutonic and Irish nurses whose principles of childbearing were not just punitive and demeaning but, by her adult testimony, downright sadistic; of a set of social norms for young women that afforded only minimal outlets for her energies, keeping house, painting, and volunteer work; of a war which separated her from her husband at a crucial moment in their marriage, right after the birth of their first child, and made her dependent upon her parents once again; of the general spiritual poverty of America after the war, as things returned to normal and people tried to forget what had happened and what they had done, tried to pick up where they had left off, and so on. This is not to excuse her behavior, but only to try to see it in a broader historical context, to see it as emerging out of a world where the avoidance of love, of genuine human affection, seems to have been the norm, a world that impelled her, probably even against her best instincts, to seek that love and affection from her child, who was naturally only too willing to give it.

But what of my father; wasn't he, in some measure, responsible as well? These are questions I have avoided, in part because I have no very good answer to them. For the fact is that until his appearance on the final night, I have no idea what he was doing or thinking while all this was going on, no idea why he acquiesced for so long to his wife's nightly departures from their bedroom. It is possible, of course, that he did not know that she was sleeping with me. There were other beds in the house. But I find that difficult to believe. He must have known and simply allowed it to happen, until, that is, his humiliation and anger overcame him.

Clearly, however, in any situation of the sort I have described, each person involved, wittingly or unwittingly, plays a role. My father's was to be absent, for whatever reason - to play no role at all until the end. In a way, I see that role as analogous to my mother's. Both of them hid behind a kind of partial passivity. She allowed me to make her "feel better," but assumed the traditionally passive female role of not going "too far" ("No, I'm sorry. You can't touch me there."). My father's role was to continue to perform his usual functions as head of the household (waiting for his breakfast to be served, leaving for work on time), while assuming that nothing was happening, at least as far as he was concerned (until, that is, he finally asserted his rights by dragging his wife back to their bedroom). Sartre might have called these elaborate strategies of rationalization and self-deception, part of the cultural baggage my parents brought with them to their marriage, "bad faith." Whatever it is called, it involved hiding behind a facade of propriety and good-breeding, acting as if everything were normal, keeping up appearances at almost any cost.

Finally, there is the question of the impact of events such as those I have described upon the development of the person who experienced them, in this case, the person who has just written these pages, me. This is the trickiest of all to get some perspective on, because it is so tied up with the person one has become, the person one thinks one is. In his seminal paper on the impact of sexual abuse on children, "Confusion of Tongues," Sandor Ferenczi remarks on the tendency such experiences have of forcing those who are the victims "to mature suddenly, not only emotionally but intellectually as well." He elaborates: "Fear of the uninhibited and therefore as good as crazy adult turns the child into a psychiatrist, as it were. In order... to protect himself from the dangers coming from people without self-control, he must first know how to identify himself completely with them." Such over identification produces a rather peculiar effect, a person who is at once acutely conscious of the needs of others yet who refuses to acknowledge any needs of his own, a person who spends most of his energy metabolizing the projections of those around him, almost none on his own nourishment. On the other hand, as Ferenczi's account also suggests, such over identification leads to a strange kind of precocity. And that transformation can have its benefits, in the form of the desire to make sense of events such as those I have described, to reach some fuller understanding of the feelings and needs of those who participated in them.

But this is only part of the story. The other part has to do with the feelings such events and the events surrounding them leave behind, feelings of anger (what shape would my life have assumed if those events had not taken place?), feelings of remorse (what part did I play in what happened?), feelings of pity, pity for everyone involved. In the end, it is not enough to say, along with the Oedipus of Oedipus at Colonus:

no, look hard,

you'll find no guilt to accuse me of--

--I am innocent.

Of course I was not guilty either, did not actively choose the situation I found myself in, only responded to it to the best of my six-year-old ability. But innocence doesn't seem to be the right term either. After all, I was delighted to have my mother in bed with me, delighted to feel her body next to mine, and would have done anything to prolong the experience despite the frustration it entailed. This is not blaming the victim or the victim blaming himself. It is simply a fact, a fact of human desire itself.

Sometimes the events I have described seem as though they happened to some other person. That is not to say that they didn't happen, but that the person they happened to wasn't me, although I know it was. The result is a feeling that can only be described as uncanny, the feeling of things that are both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, that perhaps could have remained hidden but that have come to light nevertheless. In the end, I don't believe it is possible to resolve such paradoxes or such divisions, except perhaps by telling them, to see if others can understand.

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By BROOKE HOPKINS

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