

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### OR

"You were allowed to pass. If a question was going around the circle and you couldn't or didn't want to talk, you didn't have to. You didn't have to explain yourself or justify. You could just pass. Sometimes when one was telling, another one might be crying. This was called co-work and was allowed to occur without question, if the tearful one chose not to speak. When one was telling, feeling, crying, being angry, showing any overt emotion, it was called work. We were encouraged to continue our work at home. We were told not to resist, not to avoid, not to feel guilty or repress our work. We were told that this messy, embarrassing, rug pulled out, bottomless pit opening work was honorable and necessary. We were assured that great rewards awaited us at the end of our work. They wouldn't tell us what rewards, what their nature. If we were making something, we were building in the dark. If we were tearing down, we were destroying in the dark. Darkness embraced us, kept us safe. Our sessions were two hours long. Our group met on Friday afternoons, in a basement room with no windows, some posters on the wall, and a nurse in white, riding shotgun in the corner.

"My terror was so great during the first session that most of my thoughts were terrible things, about the room, the nurse, the dreaded length of two hours. *What if I have to go to the bathroom? How is this ever going to help me? I'm not a victim. Things happen. I don't have any secrets. I don't have any reason to be here. A fair constant stream of this worthless verbiage spewed in my mind for the first hour of my name is, this is (or isn't) my first group, my therapist is, what I worry about is, pitter patter chitter chatter. Then we took a five minute bathroom break.*

"I thought of leaving, it wasn't too late to escape. Later we would take a version of a fealty oath, swear to stay through the entire process, to never purposefully betray anyone in the group. But we hadn't made any promises yet. *I can leave if I want to. I don't have to do this.*

"When we came back our leader told us about herself. She had been in five groups over a three year period. This was her first time leading alone but she had been a co-leader once before. Her therapist felt that she was ready to lead a group. I was in other groups after this one but I never had a better group leader, never. She wasn't pretty, she wasn't ugly, she wasn't a brain or a simpleton, she was present and caring, she listened with awareness and sympathy and never once belittled or lessened anyone or any issue anyone brought up. She was much stronger than she knew at the time. I pray that she has recognized her strength and has achieved her happiest dreams. At the time this group began she was experiencing severe paranoid flashbacks to a gang rape in a parking lot. Five jocks with baseball bats. She'd been a virgin when it happened and had

never had sex since. She could not easily relate to men. She was prone to panic. She told us this during the first session. I had never heard anyone speak like that before. She spoke without high drama, without even the drama I thought she'd be entitled to, she spoke to us about how her work so far had been slow, but she was feeling better. She was glad to meet us, to be given the opportunity to lead us through these sessions.

"We were to meet once a week for two hours and at the end of six months we would have a marathon, it was required. We had to commit to being at the marathon at this first session. We were required to make the commitment to move through, not only our personal process, but a process as a group. We had to agree to complete our group process at the marathon. The marathon would require nine hours on a Saturday. We all agreed to all the rules.

"Over the following six months we heard about one of our father's sexual encounters with one of us, beginning in early childhood. He came to her at night. He lay in her single bed next to her. He whispered lovey words into her six year old ears, buried his nose in her baby shampooed hair, ran his fingers, light, over her extremities, until she fell asleep. In the morning she woke alone, with cylindrical objects, like pens, in her vagina. She didn't know where these cylinders had come from, she thought that they came from God, or The Good Fairy. She never told a soul. Years later she put it together. By then he was sticking two, sometimes three pens together. She got older, bigger. He dared to slip his fingers in her vagina. He asked her what felt good, always careful to never to say anything mean or hurtful. She liked it, sort of. She felt ashamed somehow but she couldn't put her finger on why. She couldn't walk right some days and she'd bleed now and then but her mother never seemed to notice and this was in the days before people, nice people, talked about sex, especially to children. One day she tried to talk to a girlfriend at school about dads in bed at night and the smell, the bad mouth smell of whiskey. Her friend looked at her uncomprehending. She realized that her friend was not experiencing this with her father. This was shattering. She finally got up the courage to tell. She asked her well-pressed-sturdily-coifed-first-grade-teacher-church-going mother why Daddy came to visit her at night. Her mother busy baking perfect miniature cookies, decorated with multi-colored sprinkles, in the shapes of hearts and angels, a donation to one of her club's many functions, said dismissively that he came because he loved her. "Don't be silly, all Daddies kiss their little girls good night." She was the only girl child. She had two brothers who slept together in another room, in bunkbeds. She told her mother that her father didn't read her stories at night. "Don't be silly, don't lie, you will go to hell if you lie. God hears everything."

"Ok, now she was confused. This was in the days before sex education in her school district. She had no idea what sex was. It had never occurred to her to wonder where babies come from. She liked to draw and paint and make little sculptures, in fact she was acknowledged to have dexterity and talent. Her father

was a traveling salesman. Years later she thanked her hear everything God for keeping her father away for days and weeks at a time. Blessed peace from tribulation and confusion.

"Hard to imagine, we told her, what it's like to experience all this sexual abuse before having any words or concepts for it. Hard to imagine for her as well she said. She worried, this made her cry, whether these experiences, because early and thus wordless, had been absorbed into her soul. She worried that she was so dirty, so profoundly affected that she would never escape. Our group leader told her that no one can dirty your soul, that, together, we would not quit until she was satisfied that we'd picked up all the dirt. Even if we needed bionic tweezers and microscopes to find the last bits, we would promise, we all agreed, gladly, to help her do this, no matter how hard it was, no matter how long it took.

"Shame is a component of this, creeps in, over and over again, in story after story, amazing how tenacious a devil shame can be and how it operates, a key that locks us into the inevitability of the torment of grief bent inwards, unspoken, unreleased, unshared, unblest. Shame, the shroud. The sinistre doppelganger, the jailer, shame, the key.

"When she reached puberty things changed wildly for the worse. He took his penis out at night and wanted her to touch it. Then lick it. Then suck it. If she gagged when he came, he would hit her. She had to swallow it. "Mother is neat. Mother hates mess. How dare you make a mess." He'd hit her in the face til her cheeks were red, sometimes this turned him on and he'd want to do it some more. Some days she was so tired in the morning, she could barely get herself to school. She'd fall asleep on the bus or in class. She'd forget her homework. She saw visions. She'd go to the nurse, miss gym, hate anyone to see her body naked. No one asked her what was wrong.

"He had taken to squeezing her legs so hard that he left bruises on the delicate flesh of her youth. She prayed for him to stay away, to die, to get hit by a truck, to die. She never thought of running away because, in other ways she was experiencing an overprotected childhood. She had no idea where she would go or how she would go. She had no idea how to take care of herself.

"He never fucked her in the house. In the spring and summer he preferred the garden. In the winter the car. He took to hitting her in front of her mother and brothers. She became the family scapegoat. Some devil inside her kept telling her to say things, little disparaging things or little show-offy things or questions she knew he couldn't answer or ask for things she knew she couldn't have. She knew that she was being annoying but she couldn't stop so she blamed herself when he hit her. The slaps in the face became punches and then she'd have to stay home from school because her mother said she, the mother, didn't want people to know what a bad girl she, the daughter, was to make her father hit her so hard. The worst times were when she was still older and began to go on

dates. Her father would go into rages. Jealous rages? One time he threw her against the wall so hard that she broke two ribs. "You slept with him didn't you?"

"Her mother was in the room at the time. Her mother stood by watching. "Honey, maybe you shouldn't hit her so hard." When she crumpled, both her parents left the room. The next day when she fainted at school, the nurse informed her that she had broken bones and sent her to the hospital. The doctor was a friend of her Dad's, a golfing partner. Her parents put on a show of extreme concern. "It's all her fault, she will insist on riding horses no matter how often we warn her. She's always been an impossible child." Her father was a little more careful after this, but not much. He was a religious man. He considered himself blessed, only occasionally forced to sin by his whorish, seductive daughter who had been his temptress since her inauspicious birth. This was his only sin and it wasn't his fault. "Men are weak where women are concerned."

"She lost her virginity, the pretend one, on a mountain top. She was on the bottom, the slight jutting of a stone in her back was more than compensated for by the two eagles she saw flying over his unseeing head. That was her best time.

"Her worst time was when her oldest brother raped her. She never knew why he did this. He only did it once. He did it behind the shed. It was fall. "It broke my spirit."

"She cut her hair short and dedicated her life to art. She moved out of her family house. She still saw her family on holidays. They were still mean to her. Sometimes her father came to her apartment, had done several times over the course of the years. She never let him in. When he was drunk he'd bang on the door and yell, call her a whore and beg her to let him in. She never spoke to her neighbors about this. They never mentioned it either. While we were in group, one night when he came she called the cops. They escorted him away. He returned the following night. She called the cops again. They gave him an official warning. He disinherited her. Her mother refused to speak to her. She didn't try to contact her older brother, he lived far away, had a fancy bank job. Her little brother's wife called with her husband-who-wouldn't-talk-to-her's permission. "He's scared of your Dad."

"Her symptoms were implosions: Inability to take deep breaths, self doubt, skin rashes, flower phobias, inability to sleep in a bed, physical numbness. More than anything, she missed being able to laugh. When other people laughed it made her cry. When she flipped through tv channels and someone was telling a joke, even a joke she really liked the sound of, something in her would push the wrong button. Thinking she was turning it up, she would turn it off or change the channel or hit the mute button. Shifting positions to hear better, some devil in

her would hit some button so she would always miss the punch line. She was depriving herself of laughter. "Oh, how I long to laugh."