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On Loving Little Girls: The Voice of a Survivor

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From when he was very young, girls intrigued my father. Their beauty and their femininity fascinated him, but he could never quite grasp that they were human, like him. When I came along, he was utterly delighted. I was his special little girl. and he treasured me from the moment I was born. It was as if I was his; the other child was my Mother's.

I was a lively, sleepless baby. It was my father who patiently and lovingly carried me in his arms at night, soothing me to sleep. As a young schoolchild, I have very clear memories of my father coming into my bedroom every evening after work, to kiss and cuddle me goodnight. If I had a problem, I went to him. I spent hours as a small child sitting quietly as he worked in the evenings. I thought he was wonderful and wise. I think the sexual abuse first began around the time of puberty. My father felt entitled to know every part of me, and imagined that his special bond with me meant that what happened was mutual. He wanted to see, to touch, to feel, to explore, to experiment, to photograph. He didn't understand that I didn't want what he wanted. He'd whisper "Don't be so selfish" to me and I felt trapped. I tried to lock my bedroom door so he wouldn't come in in the mornings. He broke the lock. I tried to tell my Mum. She ignored me.

I changed completely. My behaviour went from a well behaved and compliant child, to one that was withdrawn and silent. I wept. I deliberately broke things. My parents asked around and were told by their friends that this happens to all teenage girls, so they ignored me. My sibling ignored me. At school, I sat and stared out of windows. The teachers concluded that I would not make university material, so they ignored me. My friends ignored me too, unable to make sense of my behaviour. I couldn't tell anyone the most important thing, what was happening, so I saw no reason to say anything at all. I went for long walks in the dark, finding old cola cans, tearing them up and using the sharp edges to cut my arms. From early teens to early

middle-age, I was looking through a fog, seeing the sunshine but unable to reach it. I hated my female body, envying what I saw as the safety and self-determination of boys' lives. Sexually, I had learnt to lie absolutely still and unresponsive, to dissociate from my own body, whenever someone wanted to do something sexual to me. A period of intense, disabling depression finally made me get therapy and helped me see, at last, that there are good men out there, men who can be trusted, I discovered that I could say yes, say no, and that sex could involve pleasure.

I have never reported my father, although I have thought about it. I did on several occasions try to talk to my parents about what happened. My mother said my claims wouldn't stand up in court. My father talked about how close we had been together. Later, he did listen and he did, briefly, understand and apologise, only to quickly say, 'Let's not talk about this any more'. I have honoured that request, even though I am sometimes filled with rage and resentment at what he did and the years of harm that he has caused.

I have watched him closely, and I believe he is no threat to anyone else. He is never with unsupervised children – and I think he simply got the father daughter relationship sadly wrong, romanticising, contaminating and sexualising what should have been a father's love for his daughter. Apart from that he is a good, decent, kind and courageous man, who in many ways I admire. What he lacks is the capacity to empathise or understand complex emotions.

Fran Henry, the founder of Stop It Now! (a specialist child protection charity started in the United States), is also a survivor of sexual abuse by her father. She tells us: “I could tell you stories of silencing and betrayal, or stories of my father’s inappropriate defensiveness when I confronted him with the truth, stories that would make you hate him in an instant. But at the next moment I could tell you stories of his humanity, his strength and his history that might leave you wanting to admire him¹.”

I recognise the deep truth in Fran's experience. Out of her compassionate analysis has come a response to child sexual abuse which does not seek to demonise or shame the perpetrator but to affirm the humanity of both perpetrator and victim, to open communication so that we can all talk about sexuality in honest and wholesome ways. Stop It Now! is creating a public health model of child protection in which all adults take responsibility for protecting all children. I hope that, had my experiences happened now, my mother would have felt braver about intervening, my teachers might have noticed and asked questions, my sibling too might have allowed themselves to notice and voice their concerns. And most of all I hope that my father, with his bizarre misunderstanding of what little girls are, might have found his assumptions challenged and confronted, so that he couldn't have convinced himself that what he did was about 'loving' his little girl.

ⁱ Henry, F (2002) 'Where is Will Shakespeare when we need him? Preventing the sexual abuse of children', San Diego Conference on Child and Family Maltreatment, (available online at http://www.stopitnow.org/sites/default/files/old_site_files/webfm/green/fh_sandiego_speech.pdf, accessed 4.4.2017)