

Bright Boy

The Dream

I dream my brother has come home whole, sober. All the light that has been so dimmed in him shines. His male presence is benevolent. Even more than that, the void of deception, despair, addiction and pain is now filled with a deep wisdom. In his presence, I feel protected, seen, loved. I feel all the things I've never felt with him.

It's OK, Boo-Boo

When I was four and my brother was two, my mother made a recording of us to send to her parents in New England. My father taught at a Midwestern university, and my mother pined for her New England home. Exiled in the flat corn fields of Ohio, far from her family, she tried to keep them up to date with her young children. In the recording, my four-year-old voice is already tense and imperious. I rip through the "Hail Mary." I sing a song "Mary Had a Little Lamb," breathlessly, out of tune. At one point, there is a pause and Mother prompts me. "I know!" I say emphatically, cross at her interruption. Already I was striving to be perfect.

Then it is Mitch's turn. "What do you want to be when you grow up, Mitch?" my mother's voice sounds like Jackie Kennedy's—clipped, precise and to my ears now, rather theatrical. There is a silence. Mother continues, "Would you like to be a doctor? A lawyer?" More silence. "Mitch?" Her voice is getting tense, impatient. Then there is a wail, and Mitch says, crying, "I don't know!" Then my father's voice says soothingly, "It's OK, Boo-Boo. It's OK."

In almost all photographs of our family, Mitch is standing next to Dad. Usually, Dad has his hand on Mitch's shoulder. It seems that when my father died, the last cords binding Mitch to sanity and health snapped. The evening of the day Dad's respirator was turned off, Mitch and I sat on my porch swing, smoking. I remember how companionable it was, and how, as the day faded, the red embers at the tips of our cigarettes comforted me in the dark. We were like that a long time, not talking, just gently swinging. Somehow his silence was the truest and eloquent gesture I can remember of him. It was the last time I felt close to him.

Even before Dad's death, I had begun to realize that I could not take at face value anything my brother said. After Dad died, that trait became more pronounced.

In our family, truth is regarded as the humble material out of which more glorious cloths can be woven. Exaggeration, irony, and comedic timing are all prized above mere facts. Growing up, it wasn't what was true that was important, but whether you told a good story. I remember as a child fresh to the South that I was shocked when a lie was called a story. A story was what you were after; it wasn't a *lie*. Yet, at the same time, I began to

become aware that in our family, what was presented as true was not always true. Or at least did not always match my perceptions

My brother Mitch, though, took our family disregard for the truth and tendency towards hyperbole to whole new levels. It was as if facts were not merely the raw material for his yarns but even more, they were his adversaries. I saw this shortly before Dad's death, when we all gathered at Mitch's house for a party. He was an executive at a large corporation at the time, and he and Susan lived in a McMansion in a suburb of Atlanta. That night I met his cohorts: handsome young men, tall in their dark suits and redolent of expensive cologne and thin, tanned young women dripping diamonds. This was before the economic crash, in the early 1990s. Mitch worked the room with his Paul Newman blue eyes, his dimples, his ice rattling in his vodka. At one point he looked across the room and winked at me, as if to say, 'Can you believe this is my life?' We weren't the kids scrounging for gumballs in the machines in Sears anymore, or selling mistletoe for pennies at Christmas.

The next day, Mitch presented Dad with a camera case that I had gone out to help him buy earlier that same day. Mitch had forgotten Dad's birthday, and wanted to get him something nice, and since I dabbled in photography he brought me along to help him. I was happy to do it. But when he presented the case to Dad, he spun a long story about how he had picked it up on a trip to Europe. I sat there stunned. Why lie? What was the point? It seemed that nothing as it was good enough; everything had to be inflated. Now I wonder if it was because, despite the house and cars and job, Mitch didn't feel good enough. Can you believe it? He might have whispered to me. But the question was, could he believe it?

Later, I would learn that indeed, nothing was what it seemed. Mitch's boss was paying to have Mitch flown to Michigan every week to meet with a world-class psychiatrist, someone who had treated royalty and celebrities and sheiks. I am not exaggerating. You couldn't make this stuff up. Evidently, the sessions were terminated because there was "nothing he could do for Mitch." Mitch didn't feel he needed help. He lost his job. His adoring wife began to question the marriage.

I keep coming back to the night my father died. It was hot and muggy, as only a July evening in Georgia could be. The tree frogs and cicadas pumped out their thrumming songs, and the porch swing creaked along rhythmically. Everything was the same, and nothing was the same. Finally, Mitch flicked his cigarette butt into the azalea bushes and stopped the swing with his foot. Without a word, but with a slight gesture of his hand, he walked to his car, bent, haltingly, like a doomed man. I wonder now if he was already lifting off the ground, already leaving us behind.

Boy Scouts and Priests

I open the paper the paper and the words leap out at me. "Boy Scouts 'perversion file' names Athens resident. Local Boy Scout Leader implicated in sexual assault records."

Something catches in my chest, stops my breath. I am twelve years old again, reading a book on the couch when my brother and father come in the door, my brother crying hysterically, and my father calling for my mother. There is a disturbance in the air, an agitation that came in like the gust of cold from the open door. I freeze in my corner, curled up on the couch, out of sight of the front hallway. "What is it?" My mother's voice is tense with alarm, and then I hear my 11 year-old brother's muffled voice, and then my mother's voice "He did what?" and "Are you sure?" and then her voice again, pitched an octave higher, "Oh, Tom, oh Tom!" and then my father's voice comforting my brother, and then my mother, angry, muttering words, "Do something...." and "But everyone loves him...." Now who is saying what I don't know. I only know that the alarm in the air signals that another catastrophe has befallen us. The alarm fills my chest, a vibration that spreads and blots out everything.

Now I check the dates boys were abused in this town. I force myself to read the description of the man, Earnest Boland. I look at his face, and it is eerily familiar -- benign, ruddy, just what you would expect from a Boy Scout leader, from a pillar of the community, from a solid church-going man of that era. Just the kind of avuncular personality that might appeal to a troubled boy whose mother was overstretched with six children, whose father didn't camp or fish, and had no interest in motorcycles. I read the first person account by one of his victims, Alan McArthur, and the description of the dull gold Lincoln Towncar makes my heart pound, my hands shake. I can see it, clearly, and there is again an odd familiarity to it, and I feel the old alarm rising. I feel a need to tell someone, but who can I tell about it? It is only a feeling I have, not a fact I know.

Alan McArthur was one of Boland's Boys, one of his favorites, and was abused by him in the early 1970s, from the time he was twelve until he was fifteen. He tells of one day trying to get away from Boland by taking the bus home from school instead of getting into Boland's gold Towncar. When Arthur gets home, he finds Boland drinking tea with his parents. Alan is dispatched with him. "What was I going to say? 'I don't want to have sex today?'" the grown Alan writes. It was then, Alan recalled, that he felt his voice, his control of the situation, robbed. He was just an object for Boland's use.

Earnest Boland slipped through all the legal cracks. His pastor knew he had a separate apartment where he took boys, but did nothing about it. According to the February 23, 2013 Onlineathens.com article by Nick Coltrane: "Rev. Dr. James N. Griffith, pastor of Beech Haven Baptist Church, which sponsored Boland's troop at that time, reportedly told the investigator that Boland had kept an apartment away from his home and without his family's knowledge." This is the pastor's comment on the release of Boland's files: "I would certainly think Mr. Boland, *being a good man*, I mean a *churchman* with a fine family, doesn't want that noise disclosed," Pastor Griffith is quoted as saying. He says that now, in this day and age, willfully ignoring the monster this man was. What is Pastor Griffith afraid of? That he will have to come to terms with his own complicity? Everywhere in our town there was a conspiracy of silence, and everywhere countless boys were losing their voices, their futures.

I read about Boland's victims, one of whom has committed suicide, others whose lives have been ruined by drugs and alcohol, or by intractable depression. I read about families torn apart. I think of my brother's substance abuse, of marriages ended, the relations with his children blasted. I tell my husband I feel sure that my brother was abused. He says it is all conjecture, that I have too much imagination. If you really want to know, "call your mother and ask." I cannot call her. If it is true, it could re-traumatize her. I want nothing more than to call her, because this awful feeling is too much to bear alone. But if it is true, I am afraid that she will have relegated it to the "oubliette" where she keeps unpleasant facts. If I drag it out of there, I have no idea what would happen, but I'm afraid it would not be good for either of us.

I don't know for sure if my brother has been abused, yet as each account of child abuse has come out over recent years, I've found myself riveted with the kind of intense interest that can be only personal. I watch "Mea Maxima Culpa," horrified but fascinated. I look at the faces of the boys in the deaf school and see my brother in the freckled-face grin of one, in the blond cowlick of another, and in the patched eyeglasses of a third. I look at their trusting faces and think of their powerlessness. Could Mitch, the altar boy, have been abused there as well? I read an article in the New York Times about a man who has written a play about his abuse at the hands of a priest. I wince as I read about the tangled, ambivalent feelings he had—feeling privileged and titillated and finally deeply shamed. I read about his confused boundaries, his struggles with power issues, and his temptation to repeat the abuse when he was a teen. He describes his grief at the loss of his innocence, his deeply rooted feelings of unworthiness, as if he were vile and barely human. It is the seduction of the mind as well as the body that horrifies. It is soul theft of the most insidious kind.

My parents put their trust in two institutions that we now know are rife with child abuse. Transplants to the South, they clung to their faith, sending us to a Catholic mission school. But they were unfamiliar with the South, and so when Boland was recommended as a great Scout leader, a man gifted with boys, they must have taken that on face value. They were given no reason to doubt that, I'm sure, for the man had a stellar reputation in the town. He ran a profitable business, was on important boards, was a good church man. I think that child abuse was so far from their experience it would never have crossed their minds.

But what they also didn't know was that in a small Southern town, people protect their own. According to the newspaper article: "A woman who answered the phone number listed for Mrs. Perry Sentell Jr., who was one of the people on the troop committee notified of Boland's final resignation after he was blacklisted, said "it wouldn't help anyone to drudge up these demons. "I think if it were just ignored at this point it would help a lot more folks," the woman said before hanging up." Boy Scout leaders who knew of the allegations against him "discouraged" but *did not prevent* him from starting up another troop after he had resigned previously due to earlier allegations. His name had not been put on the Confidential Boy Scout blacklist list, so there was nothing legal to prevent him from becoming active again. He rampaged through our town, a giant picking up boys, using them, discarding them. The pillars of the community turned their

eyes away. He was too powerful to mess with. My parents weren't plugged into the power structure of the town, as he was. If they brought charges against Mr. Boland, they would have been at a clear disadvantage. I don't know if they took any actions, because I don't know if it happened.

Alone at my own kitchen table, the photo of Earnest Boland makes me dizzy and nauseas. My breathing grows shallow and quick. I do not know for sure if my brother was on one of his victims, and yet the familiar alarm spreads through my body.

Knock-Out Punch

One of my early memories is of coming home from elementary school one day to find scribbled in black marker on the wall, on a phonebook, on pieces of scrap paper, the crudely spelled words, "Mommy doesn't love me, Mommy doesn't love me," and then finding Mitch with the offending marker. He must have been six or seven. I remember wondering if Mommy had seen them. I don't know what happened then, if she found the words, or if I was instructed to scrub them off. I don't know. I just know that the memory still makes me sad.

My mother was alone in a part of the country utterly foreign to her. She was a New Englander through and through, and the first ten years of her marriage in the flat Midwest had seemed like exile enough, but to have to bring her family to the Deep South was another degree of exile altogether. My father, an art professor, was excited by the prospect of the new up and coming art department. My father loved the South, the friendliness of the people, the big sky that reminded him of his Western roots. My parents were young, idealistic and adventurous, with five children and one on the way.

Although my mother was game, she had her reservations. On the trip down, she drilled us kids on "How Now Brown Cow," making sure we rounded our 'o's and enunciated our consonants. It didn't help when we passed through a small town and saw a burnt cross on a lawn. This was 1964, the middle of the Civil Rights struggle in the South. When my mother saw the cross, she turned to Dad and cried, "Tom, Tom, where have you brought us?" The university was progressive in many ways, the department collegial, but we were surrounded by a deeply conservative, deeply Protestant culture. I remember KKK marches. It wasn't only our speech that marked us out as Yankees. We would find out just how different we were in time, living in a place that didn't cotton to differences.

My parents had little money, one car, and no community outside the university and the church. Mom was mostly alone with us. I don't remember coffee klatches with neighbors, or her friends coming around. She had six kids on the Catholic model, but didn't have the extended Catholic family to help her out. Three months after my youngest sister was born, not even a year in her new home, Mom fell and broke her pelvis. She was months in the hospital, and they wouldn't let her see her baby, a cruelty and backwardness I find hard to fathom. She endured many trials in her life, but that separation from her baby was one of the worst.

I remember longing for Mommy--she was Mommy then--while she was in the hospital, her absence the palpable presence around which our family was constituted. That time seemed like one long hot afternoon spent listlessly swinging on the backyard swing. Her broken pelvis was her second long absence. The first time, I vowed to God I would never be selfish again, I would be good, anything, just bring her home. In the confessional every week I confessed my sin: I didn't obey my mother, I was rebellious. In this second absence, my chest was tight, my fear and loneliness and guilt all battling it out there. Our family, it seemed, was felled by catastrophes, one after the other. As a child, I was always waiting for the next upheaval, and envied children who seemed to have solid ground under their feet.

One cold, rainy spring day we were sent out to play in our small yard. Pollen covered everything. The sickly sweet smell of wisteria hung in the air. We were out of sorts, bored with the oppressive boredom of childhood. I was about nine, Mitch, seven and Sean, five. I suppose I went into a corner with a book. Before I knew what was happening, Mitch and Sean were punching each other. Mitch was the aggressor. Sean had his hands up to his face to protect his glasses. I screamed at them to stop before they broke their glasses, but it was too late. Mitch wouldn't stop, and Mom had to rush in and separate the two of them, Sean sobbing and Mitch's arms still flailing.

Mitch couldn't stand Sean. Mitch had been born angry, it seemed, and it didn't help that Sean was everything Mitch wasn't—compliant, good-natured. Sean had almost died at birth because of a milk allergy, and my mother—always great in a crisis—had fought hard to save him. She was often gone after he was born, keeping vigil at the hospital. I was very excited when I was taken to the hospital to see Sean. I looked through the thick plate glass window and was disappointed to see a scrawny, crying yellow baby with tubes running into him. It was Mom's determination that probably saved him. From the beginning, Mom and Sean were very close, a closeness Mitch had never shared with our mother.

Mitch's animosity towards Sean never really died. For our parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, my father rented a house in the mountains for a weekend, and we all came back from our fledgling young adult lives. I flew home, seriously depressed from my lonely graduate school life in Boston, where I did things the only way I knew how—by sheer willpower, and without support. Everybody was there, each of us in character. My youngest brother, Jim, was a sailor, and took us all out on a borrowed boat. In the middle of the lake, true to form, Sean and Mitch got into a fist fight, landing Sean in the water with broken eye glasses. Glasses were always being broken.

Recently, all of us got together to celebrate Jim's promotion. The boys don't get into fist fights now and there is a surface civility. Yet I could sense Sean keeping some distance. Mitch drinks and is unpredictable. He can turn from hail-fellow-well-met into a blaze of sarcasm and barely veiled aggression, a turn that happens so quickly that it takes a few minutes of numbing shock to realize it. We were in a restaurant, and Mitch was hitting on the waitress, a friend of Jim's. I was saddened that on Jim's day he had to prove that

he was the alpha male. It is an old shtick, we are all used to it, but it seemed to me that Mitch was going through the motions, pro-forma, to prove something to himself. It seemed his timing was off. He's gained weight and his movie-star good looks aren't quite what they used to be. His jokes and banter weren't getting much response; he seemed to be working from a script, rather than responding to people in the moment.

As we gathered to leave, he stood outside under an awning as rain poured off it. He hadn't heard us saying that we would all walk over to the parking lot with our umbrellas, and he was waiting for a car. Then he asked where Mary was, the one sister who hadn't been there. "Mary's not here, Mitch, remember?" I said softly. He realized his mistake and quickly covered his embarrassment with a joke. His face in the dim light looked slack and afraid, and I thought I glimpsed the little boy grasping his marker, crying "Mommy doesn't love me."

Just Playing

Our family has a finely-honed aptitude for selective forgetting. We also have an Irish loyalty to family, an us-against-the world sensibility. We must support the family's myth about ourselves at all costs, which can require self-abnegation, a subtle pressure to deny what one may have seen or heard or concluded if it goes against the family's official story. It is an unconscious, ingrained, reactionary habit.

In the late 90's, when Mitch lost his first corporate job, my brother-in-law offered him a position in his business. Richard had worked hard to create his own business, and he liked Mitch and wanted to help him out. So Mitch's family moved to Pennsylvania, and true to form, rented a beautifully restored old brick farmhouse near Mary and Richard. My sister Margaret and I drove up with our kids for a visit that summer. All our children were young. We were in the summer of our lives, young with young children. We were young enough to still have dreams for the future, and old enough to feel in control of our fates. Our children were beautiful and healthy, the babies and toddlers delicious in their roundness. We mothers were in love with what we had produced; the men with the lives they had built. It was all good.

We had a cookout at Mitch's elegant rented farmhouse. Susan, Mitch's wife, was a wonderful cook. The dusk gathered around us as Mitch turned the meat on the grill, its charred goodness making our mouths water. Drinks were poured and we settled around the pool, inhaling the scent of foxgloves and delphiniums from the garden. We heaped our plates, cajoling impatient children to eat, which they did cursorily—"Is that enough, Mom? Can I go now?" Released, the children ran in and out of the patio, over to the horse barn, in and out of the gardens, shaking petals off the glowing hydrangea blossoms, their giggles shrill in the quiet evening. The adults, surfeited from food and drink, sprawled in lawn chairs, talking and laughing. Except for Mitch, who rough-housed with his son and two nephews, all between seven and nine years old. The sky grew darker, and we women had started clearing dishes when suddenly the little boys emerged from

the bushes, crying. Uncle Mitch had chased them and pulled down their pants, to “see what they had,” taunting them, and then shaming them for being embarrassed.

As the story came out, there was that familiar numbing shock, that lag between ordinary reality, and a sickly nightmare reality. The mothers gathered the boys, taking them to their rooms, and their soothing voices could be heard as they climbed the stairs. Mitch laughed, shrugged, said “what’s the big deal?” to Sean and Richard, and called the boys “little pansies.” I stared in horror at Mitch, at his invitation to invalidate what we had just experienced.

It was a long night. One by one the mothers excoriated Mitch, including his wife Susan. Mitch maintained they all got the wrong idea, they didn’t know anything about boys. He was just playing, just fooling around. For fun. Everyone was overreacting. Mitch couldn’t see what the problem was, or maintained he couldn’t see. He and Susan argued late into the night, with doors slamming and voices yelling, while the rest of us cowered behind locked doors. The next day, Mitch offered a pro-forma apology, his wife glaring at him the whole time.

Although we girls made reference to the incident several times, it was seen as an isolated event, not part of a pattern. Years before, at Jim’s wedding, Mitch had grabbed Sean’s wife and put her in a headlock while we all looked on. He acted as if it were just a joke, even as she cried and begged him to let her go, becoming frantic. It was as if we were all drugged, entranced, unable to see what was before us. Finally Sean stepped in and made him release her. Years later, at a Thanksgiving gathering at the beach, Mitch grabbed his seven year old stepdaughter, a child with a developmental disability, and held her, brandishing a huge knife while threatening to cut off her finger. She screamed and writhed in terror while he laughed, and there we all were, looking on, until someone snapped out of it and forced him to let her go. “Whaaat?? Hey, I was just playing,” he shrugged and grinned, his dimples showing.

When Susan left him, she said the final straw had been the night they were at dinner at his boss’s house in Chicago. He’d had too much to drink and was telling the story of how our parents had thrown him out on the street when he was seventeen. My parents did do that-- because he had been drinking their booze, because they found pornography and condoms under his bed, because they didn’t know what to do with him. Susan, alarmed that this was not an appropriate topic for a new boss, kicked him under the table, trying to get him to change course. Instead, he angrily made them leave the party, livid that she had dared to kick him under the table, dared to interrupt his story. So livid, he purposely drove fast on the wrong side of the road to frighten her. It was very late at night, there were few cars on the highway, but she was terrified. “Mitch, stop, what about the kids? They’ll be orphans,” she pleaded with him, crying. He wouldn’t stop.

On Your Own, Kid

I remember well when Mitch was thrown out of the house. I felt a kind of solidarity with him then, and I was horrified that he would have to fend for himself. My mother was

often extreme, and I feared that this was one of her unbalanced decisions. I knew that he had been trouble, but I still couldn't believe it.

I don't know how Mitch felt about me. Sometimes I think he must have hated me for all the years I'd been held up as an example—I was studious, responsible, quiet and compliant. I was also depressed. But he couldn't have known that. We kids may have lived in the same house and been close when we were younger, but as we grew into adolescents, we were each isolated by our own struggles and efforts to not be in the hot seat, to not invoke Mom's rage.

Mitch had it tough at school and at home. He got roughed up in the boy's bathroom in high school, turned upside down and shaken for money because he was short and white. I don't remember him having friends. At home, he was constantly in trouble for talking back, for not doing his chores, for his grades. He was smart, but his teachers reported he didn't always work up to his capacities. It isn't easy being the black sheep, even if it does get you noticed. Mitch started smoking pot at thirteen, and no wonder.

When he was fifteen, my parents sent him to high school in Kansas, to the Christian Brothers. I don't know what happened there or why he didn't stay, because when he came home that Christmas he seemed happy, for what seemed like the first time in his life. I had been away, too, to a small Catholic college, and had been happy there, maybe for the first time in my life. I remember thinking, when we were both home from our adventures, that maybe someone there in Kansas understood Mitch and cared about him. I hoped that was the case.

Our happy lives away were short-lived, however. It seemed sad to me then that he had to come home. I never knew why. Was it money? Was something wrong with the school? It is curious to me now that we never talked about our lives with each other. I was much closer to Sean. Still, a year later, when they threw Mitch out at seventeen—an act of “tough love”—I did what I could to help him. I knew an older bohemian couple from a hippie poetry group who said they would help. The old man had a house in a poor part of town and said Mitch could stay use it. I drove Mitch there, to a neighborhood that seemed like a different country, with old unpainted frame houses in various stages of disrepair. It was a very clandestine operation; my parents couldn't know I was helping him. Or maybe they did know, somehow, and counted on it.

When we found the house, or what could be called more properly, a shack, I was dubious. It was unheated and had broken windows and porn magazines stuffed into the cracks. The floor was littered with trash, the furniture smelled of mildew and cat piss. Mitch said he was okay with it, maybe grateful just to have a place to crash. I stood in the middle of the living room, unsure of what to do, miserable, not wanting to leave him there. Yet, I couldn't think of an alternative idea. The ground was heaving again, and I could not find my balance. It was cold, a biting winter cold that seeped through the thin walls. Mitch told me to go. Maybe he just wanted to be done with me, with our family. He was young and slight and I think his glasses were broken. I drove home, crying. Our childhoods were over.

Mitch survived my parents' tough love. He got a job shoveling manure at the vet school, then moved up to managing a 7-11. He went to school—I guess my folks helped out. I don't remember because I had troubles of my own. I was miserable at the large state university; I missed the small college where I'd been so happy, where I'd had friends, done well, and fell in love. Mitch drifted in and out of my view. He had become unbelievably handsome, smart and silver-tongued. When I did encounter him, he usually had some hot chick on his arm. Gone was the frightened boy, his face pale, that I had left years ago in that shack.

Then he met Susan, a vivacious sorority girl, whom he described as having the “face of a Barbie and the mind of a *Fortune 500* executive.” He and Susan were set to be a power couple. Mitch had morphed into a slick yuppie I no longer recognized. There was a certain hardness and distance to him, and not a bit of vulnerability. Mitch seemed not only to have survived, but to have thrived. If my parents wanted successful, autonomous children, he was doing them one better by succeeding in a realm, business, none of us had either experience with or context for. At last, Mitch would have his own bailiwick in the crowded field of striving, achieving siblings.

Mitch would grow to be so wealthy that none of us could comprehend it. At one point as a Vice President of an international insurance company, he lived in a \$10,000 a month penthouse in Hong Kong, wore Armani suits, drove a Porsche. His wine allowance was more than most of our mortgages. He traveled the world. He collected art. We rarely saw him, and when we did, I never felt I had a handle on who he was. He was funny, charming, wealthy. By then, he and Susan were divorced. His children traveled to visit him in China, where they often spent days alone in his penthouse apartment. His oldest child, a daughter, refused to go back. His oldest son, his namesake, took tremendous abuse from Mitch, but always then redoubled his efforts to get Mitch's approval. His youngest son soon wrote him off.

Mitch didn't seem to notice or care what his relations were with his children. He could be seductive or indulgent or sullen or punitive with them. It was very confusing to them. His daughter ended up with anorexia. Susan was always having to take him to court for money he owed her and the kids. When she asked him to pay for his daughter's psychiatrist, he refused. He liked to impress everyone with his wealth, but when it came to supporting his children, that was another story. And, according to him, it was all Susan's fault.

I gave Susan an art poster of my father's so that she and her kids could have a piece of Dad's art in their home, since Mitch had taken everything. Dad had loved Susan, who had given him three grandchildren, and had been an important member of our family. When Mitch found out, he called and lambasted me for siding with that c**nt. I told him I would not listen to him denigrate his wife, who had been a devoted wife and mother “Fine,” he said, “I'll never talk to you again.” And he didn't, for many years.

So It Is True

It is one thing to have a hunch, an intuition, a confused memory, to even start a memoir about it, to write out everything you can remember—and quite another thing to have the thing confirmed.

There were many secrets in our house growing up, many things we never talked about, that were not formulated in words, but that nevertheless were as much a part of our experience as the daily walk to school, as Mass on Sunday. We knew things without knowing them, or at least some of us did. There was little chance of formulating feelings into words. The feelings were disavowed, and took up residence in our bodies. Things happened, things weren't talked about. Things happened. My mother had severe post-partum depression when I was seven, and disappeared into a mental hospital for many months. It was the most important event of my young life, yet no one talked about it. It took up so much space inside me, but it was never referred to. It was as if it hadn't happened.

If we had been able to formulate the inchoate feelings into words, there was little chance of telling an empathic witness. We were inculcated into a fierce loyalty. We never would talk with outsiders about our family. The impression my mother wanted to give the world was the one we gave—bright, achieving, well-mannered, well turned-out children. Everything was perfect. To question that version of things was to risk excommunication. To hold the hot potato. Even now, in middle age, I feel a terrible anxiety about it.

Information in our family is currency. The idea of transparency, of openness, is alien. So I found out that indeed my brother had been molested by Earnest Boland, and that he had been one of his “favorites,” by a most circuitous route.

My sister Mary said she had to come talk to me, it was urgent. She was in town, visiting my mother, and I had been out of town, so we didn't overlap but for a short time. This is what she told me: this spring, my mother cut out and sent the article about Earnest Boland to Mitch, the same article that had spurred my panic attack in the kitchen. She sent it as “just as a piece of information.” Mom must have told Sean about the article because when Sean and Mitch were home together recently, Sean asked Mitch about whether he had been one of “Boland's boys.” To my astonishment, Mitch told him yes, he had been one, and “one of the favorites.”

“I knew it,” I said to Mary.

“How? Sean told me not to tell anyone.”

“I knew it because I remember,” I told her. And then I told her about reading the article.

“You mustn't tell anyone,” she said. “I will have to tell Sean I told you. I just had to.”

“Thank you, because I needed to know.”

Mary, the youngest, is close to Mom and can often speak to her in ways I might not. When Mary asked her about it, Mom at first treated it lightly, as if it merely a piece of

news, of passing interest. Mary pushed her on it, and then she buried her face in her hands. They didn't know what to do, she told Mary, tearfully. And now she regrets it, because other boys could have been saved.

When my sister told me this, we stood in my kitchen and held each other, weeping for the child Mitch had been, for the unfathomable tragedy that had befallen him. We wept as sisters, we wept as mothers of sons. For the first time, the terrible burden of grief I felt about my brother could be shared. It was such a relief to be together, to acknowledge it, to grieve it. But after my sister left, the pain and reality set in. I felt as if an invisible hand was squeezing my heart. I couldn't draw a full breath. I was surprised to see my reflection in the mirror, surprised to see no blood, no visible indication of the terrible grief I felt. I was in shock, unable to think or move properly. I dropped things. I kept bumping elbows and hips and knees. This lasted almost a week, and when my husband took me out to lunch to help me feel better, I sat there looking at him numbly. "If this is a fraction of how my brother felt," I told him, "I can see why he is an alcoholic. I don't think I can endure this pain." Finally, when I didn't think I could take anymore, the pain subsided. But the sadness, oh, the sadness stays.

My brother was a sweet boy. If his experience follows Alan McArthur's, he was forcibly intoxicated, shown pornography and raped when he should have been fishing and camping, growing into his maturity unmolested. He was a bright, beautiful boy, whose beauty attracted a demon. He should have been respected, cherished, guided. Instead, he was violated, confused, seduced, and shamed. The sick world he entered didn't square with the way he was told the world worked. Where was God, the idealistic and pure Catholic version of the world? It deserted him, and he was left alone with his shame. He acted out, was the black sheep, got punished, and acted out. Someone in our family was always holding the hot potato. Hot potato, hot potato, who has the hot potato? Mitch has the hot potato.

My parents' suffering is hard to imagine as well, the isolation and impotence they must have felt. They were progressive in many things, but sex and the body were still very much taboo. There were no support groups then, no internet. The shame and feeling of failure on their part must have been unbearable. For counsel, they had only priests, and they may have turned to them. What comfort and guidance could they have given them? My parents had so many catastrophes to contend with, so many demands on them, that this may have been just one more. Perhaps they thought it best to just go on, to not address it. I know they did the best they could, and that they loved Mitch. It was just bigger than they were, this ravaging giant.

The past cannot be undone, but my hope is that my brother, by allowing himself to acknowledge what was done to him, will begin to find healing. My husband says I can't prove causality between the abuse Mitch endured and the problems Mitch has had, but it seems to me the abuse has had a huge impact on his life. Research about trauma experienced before the age of seventeen shows that if the child has an empathic witness to whom he can tell his story, he is much more likely to heal than if the trauma is a secret. Mitch has his story to tell, and I hope he finds an empathic witness to tell it to. I hope he

finds someone he can tell the worst to, and that person will look him in the eye and tell him he is worthwhile, lovable and cherished. And I hope he believes it. Because he is. I know he is.

As for me, I cannot tell Mitch's story, only my story of Mitch. The writer Steve Nadis says this about second-hand trauma. "A character in the movie *Diner* threatened a rival by saying, "I'm going to hit you so hard, I'll hurt your entire family." New research suggests major traumatic events can do the same, disrupting the lives not only of victims, but of their families as well." I've been grieving for my brother for a long time, an ambiguous grief that seemed overwhelming and yet unreal. I think everyone in our family was affected, in ways small and large. Perhaps now we can begin to heal as well.

My dream tells me what I can't admit to myself—that I long for the brother I've lost, the brother I should have had.