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Molestation

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Molestation

SHEILA KOHLER

EVERY GIRL, PROBABLY, HAS A STORY OF THIS KIND to tell. Yet it has taken me many years to tell mine. As so often happens, I wrote it first as a story, a fictional account, but it occurred to me that the silence and shame that surrounds these events should be broken once and for all, directly. So this is true, or as true as I can remember it.

This happened in France.

There was, perhaps, a prelude. I must have been seventeen at the time, and I was in Paris doing, ironically, a course in French civilization at the Sorbonne. I went to consult a doctor for the acne which had troubled me since I had become a teenager: the small pimples on forehead and nose that are so common and yet seem so dreadful to a young girl at that age.

The doctor, whose name I have forgotten, was a well-known dermatologist. He practiced, as so many doctors do in France, within the confines of his elegant apartment. As I was ushered in the door by the nurse, I walked past the glass doors of his living room and was able to see the fine furniture, the baby grand piano, and the presence of children in the house, indicated by a few toys scattered on the Persian carpet.

The dermatologist was a good one. He cured—or was it simply that age was working for me at this point?—my pimples in a few visits.

One afternoon, as I lay on his table, my skin clear, he said to me, "Well, I have cured these pimples on your face. Now, take your dress off, and let's have a look at your back."

"I don't think I have any pimples on my back," I said.

"Well, let's just have a look," he said.

It never occurred to me to demur. I did as I was told. I can no longer remember exactly what he did to me, memory conveniently blanking that out, but it was quite obvious that he was no longer bent on curing my pimples. That time I escaped, rushing through

his living room in indignation. You would think I would have learned my lesson.

Twelve years later, having been married for ten years and having had three children, I consulted a psychiatrist, when my husband left me for another woman. This man's name I do remember: Dr. Soubrier, he was called, and he had been recommended to me both by a friend and by the American Hospital.

He, too, practiced in an elegant office in his own home. I remember my first visit. A secretary or nurse in a blue uniform ushered me along a dimly lit corridor, walking in high heels and swaying her slim hips as she went along. The waiting room was large and sunny and there was another woman already there. She looked pale and, I thought, rather masculine, with grey hair drawn back severely from her face.

Is it possible that the ceiling of the room was domed with a pale blue sky painted on it with cherubs aiming their darts at the clouds? So it seems to me now. Dr. Soubrier, after having kept me waiting for some time, ushering the other woman in and out the door—finally received me.

I remember, in my nervousness, almost dropping the book I was trying to read while waiting, on the floor.

I must describe the doctor in detail, because his physical appearance was important to me afterwards. He was totally bald—a shiny bare pate, and he was plump, so that he looked rather like a Buddha with cherubic cheeks and a mysterious Buddha-like smile. His office was dimly lit, the curtains drawn on the bright afternoon sun and garden outside.

It was spring in Paris, and his office was in one of those expensive ground floor apartments in the sixteenth district of Paris, not far from where I was living in the house where my husband had left me, with my three small girls. My youngest child was two.

In his expensive shiny grey suit, Dr. Soubrier sat behind his ornate Empire desk with all the gold filigree. Behind him on either side of the window were bookcases filled with learned bound volumes: Freud, of course, but I noticed, too, many volumes of Durkheim and one in particular called "Suicide". Perhaps I wondered how many of his patients had committed suicide, and if the woman with the grey hair had ever attempted such a thing.

It was something I had contemplated myself on hearing the news of my husband's departure. We had married when I was nineteen, and I felt as if he was taking half my life with him when he went. I had found myself with his razor in my hand, looking down at the blue artery on my wrist. It was the reason I was there in the office that day.

Dr. Soubrier asked me what he could do for me. He listened to my halting words. I don't think he said much in response. I do remember him saying then or perhaps at some later visit, "Your problem is not that of a lonely middle-aged woman who cannot find a man."

I was just thirty, not unattractive, and I was lucky enough to be independent financially, but I felt old and ugly and utterly bereft, as one does when a man you love and have lived with for ten years, the father of your children, leaves you for a younger woman.

As I was walking out the door one afternoon, and Dr. Soubrier was shaking my hand, he suddenly grasped me and pulled me to him. For a man of his size he was remarkably agile and quite strong. I remember thinking that this was not happening, it was not possible that this respectable doctor, with all his learned volumes, recommended by the American Hospital, was doing this to me. This was some other man and some other woman who stood there stunned, silenced, unable to move while the man pushed down her panties and thrust his little pink penis inside her flesh.

"Standing up like stallions!" he whispered in my ear, and then almost immediately. "A Kleenex?" a box of which was conveniently on the table beside him. It had taken only a moment to accomplish what he had desired.

I left his office and rushed home. As I went through the sunny beautiful streets of Paris, I kept saying, the words springing forth from my mouth, alas too late, "No, No! No!" I shut myself up in the bedroom and wept. What seemed so appalling to me was that I had allowed this repulsive little man to do this to me! How shameful! No one must know how I had just stood there and done nothing about it. Now, I picked up the telephone and called him up and shouted at him. "It's like committing incest!" I screamed at him.

"Well, my dear," he said in his suave voice, "There are worse things."

The terrible thing is that after a short pause, I actually went back to see the man again, as though in some way a return could undo

what had been done. Though he never touched me again, I saw him several times. When I mentioned what had happened, he told me that women jumped over his desk to hold him in their arms. I no longer remember how long it was before I found an American psychoanalyst who allowed me to lie on his couch and talk without touching me while I talked about Dr. Soubrier, without naming him however in my shame, even there.

All these years I have carried this secret around with me feeling only shame and guilt until recently, who knows why, I found myself writing a fictional story about a young girl, a student, similarly molested by a psychiatrist who is also her professor. The young girl, too, comes back after being molested to see the psychiatrist/professor, but this time she is armed with a knife.