

## What Memory Hurts

by H. W. Moss

“Close your eyes, September, and let us return to the dream.”

The young woman lay back and did as she was told with fingers laced resting on her stomach. The therapist, too, became relaxed and settled herself in the overstuffed leather chair across from the couch where the girl reclined. She directed the girl by asking questions.

“Where are you now?”

“In my secret place.”

“That means you are hiding, doesn’t it?”

Shyly, the woman replied, “Yes.”

“Why are you hiding?”

“Because dinner got spilled on the ceiling and I had to go to my secret place.”

“You mean your parents had another fight?”

“Yes.”

“So you ran away.”

“Yes.”

“And exactly where was this secret place?”

“In their bedroom behind the cabinet with the big mirror.”

“They never knew you were there?”

“Nah, un-uh.”

“And what would happen after they had a fight?”

“They would make up. In bed, they made up and had sex.”

“Which you frequently watched.”

“Un-hunh. Yah.”

“What was your father’s name?”

“Daddy.”

“No, I mean his first name?”

“Daddy. That’s what I always call him.”

“And what did he call you?”

A shy smile spread over the girl’s face as she replied, “He’d say, ‘Hello my little butterfly look alike. How is my princess?’”

“He called you his princess. What about your mother? Did she treat you with the same love and affection as your father did?”

The girl screwed up her face before she replied. “No. She was always hitting me, saying I chipped the dishes when I washed them. Or making me clean my room or take out the garbage. She was mean.”

The psychiatrist waited for the girl to elaborate. When nothing was forthcoming, she prodded. The object was to elicit references to the patient’s past life and any events that might affect the present. From there, corrections could be made.

“Can you tell me what you are wearing, how you feel, what you see?”

The girl described a cute blue dress with crenulations and a matching blue bow in her hair.

“Wait a minute, September. Last session, didn’t you tell me that was what you wore to your fourth birthday party? The blue dress and blue bow?”

The woman made a face like she was surprised and said, “Well, yes. I guess I did. Maybe I’m wearing the same dress only it’s not my birthday,” she said with almost too much enthusiasm.

“You said you were not in school yet when you first wore the dress. Now you’re in first grade. That would make you six years old at least, not four. Wouldn’t you have outgrown that dress by now?”

The patient responded to this impeccable logic by saying, “Uh, well, I guess I should say I’m wearing another blue dress, a different one just like the one I wore at my party.”

After a few seconds of note taking, the psychiatrist said, “Continue.”

“Well, I’m perfectly safe in my secret place, I am always safe there. It takes a long time for them to come upstairs and make up, but that’s what they always do. I fell asleep for a while and then I heard their bed squeaking and I knew what they were doing. Usually they come in and wake me because they are still arguing, Daddy mostly saying, ‘Please, please, please, honey I’m sorry,’ and Mommy finally kisses him and they fall back on the bed and I watch as they start doing it.”

Silence. The doctor held her pen positioned to continue writing, but the girl said nothing until prodded. “And then what happened?”

“Daddy moved out.”

“Your parents were divorced when you were six. You told me that last session.”

The young woman smiled broadly saying, “And I got a whole new bunch of brothers when Daddy remarried.”

“You were an only child until age seven, is that correct?”

“Yes. Um-hunh.”

“At that time your father remarried and his new wife had three children of her own, all boys, is that correct?”

“Yes. Um-hunh.”

“They ranged in age from nine to twelve, am I right?”

“Yes. Um-hunh.”

“So they were older than you.”

“Yes. Um-hunh.”

“You stayed with them over summer vacations. Is that right?”

“Yes. Um-hunh.”

“Tell me what that was like.”

“Oh, I had a lot of fun playing cowboys and Red Rover and riding bicycles. I learned a lot from them. Hal and I are still good friends. Manny and David are married. They have their own families now so I don’t see them much anymore. But when we were kids, it was great fun.”

“Where, what city was that?”

“Outside Seattle. They moved from Southern California to the Seattle area after Daddy married Kathy. I stayed with Mommy and we lived in Long Beach with Jenkins. ”

“Who was Jenkins?”

“That’s the name of my brothers’ real father. Jenkins was married to Kathy before Daddy married her. Jenkins never exactly lived with Mommy and me, not officially. But he did come by a lot and sometimes he stayed over.”

“He stayed over night?”

“Yes. Um-hunh. With Mommy.”

“In your mother’s bed?”

“Yes. Um-hunh.”

The psychiatrist’s pen rode the note pad like a seismograph in an earthquake. She flipped pages and kept the pad on her knee as her notes became more detailed. She made an abbreviated list of the woman’s statements and put numbers next to them.

“Did you also watch from your secret place when they made love, this Jenkins and your mother?”

“Yes. Um-hunh.”

This was where care had to be taken in phrasing the questions. A patient in such a state was vulnerable to suggestive influences. The psychiatrist said, “So you lived in the same house with your mother and her boy friend, is that correct?”

“Sometimes he lived there, yes.”

“Did this Jenkins ever act inappropriately toward you?”

“Yes. Um-hunh.”

“He did? How?”

“He was mean to me like mommy was mean when I didn’t do something right. And he spanked me.”

The doctor’s eyebrows rose at this news. She placed a nine at the end of the line next to this last bit of information.

“Did he do anything else to you?” She kept her tone flat, tried not to sound arch with this question.

“Like what?”

“Well, did he ever touch you in the wrong way?”

“Well, maybe. When I was going to bed at night he would help mommy change me into my pajamas. Sometimes he touched me when he was changing my clothes.”

“Did he put his hands where he should not have put them?”

“Well, I dunno. I just remember his smell of man-ness. He didn’t smell like Daddy.”

“Can you describe his odor? Was it sweet or sour, fresh or stale, did it remind you of anything like laundry soap or cologne?”

“Different from Daddy.”

“Different? In what way different?”

“He smelled like the wet spot he left behind in Mommy’s bed.”

The doctor became more certain her inquiry was yielding results. Her list had grown as had the numbers. She added up the numbers and arrived at a conclusion which she recognized from post-doctoral graduate school courses. The technique was supposed to help identify what might have triggered a psychosis. The calibration indicated a finding. In this case, the total fell within a range that suggested repressed childhood sexual behavior.

She wrote on the pad, “Possible gross sexual imposition by the mother’s boyfriend.” Then she scratched out the words “gross sexual imposition” and wrote in capital letters, RAPE.

“I think that will be all for today, September. Remember the magic words?”

The woman's eyes opened wide and she gasped a breath of air. Her face displayed several changes of expression until she settled on knitted eyebrows. She sat up, threw her legs over the side of the couch and faced the counselor.

“Whew. That must have been quite a session. I'm shaking and all sweaty. What was I telling you?”

The psychiatrist looked at her patient thoughtfully with her pen hand resting on the pad. “You told me one of your deepest, darkest secrets,” she said. “You told me you were abused as a child. And although you never explicitly said so, I believe you were sexually abused.”

“What? That's impossible. I would remember something like that.”

“That is precisely the point of this therapy, September. You did remember. You just don't recall it now because you told me this while under shallow hypnosis and now that you are awake you have repressed the memories again.”

“Why do you say memories? More than once? Was I abused more than once?”

“In my professional opinion, yes, you were sexually abused many times. That's indicated by how strong and how deeply repressed these memories are. ”

“Wow. If that's true, we have to tell my mother.”

“Yes,” the psychiatrist said knowingly. “Yes, we do have to tell her immediately.”

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Once upon a time there were two couples: Kathy and Jenkins, Mary and Bob. Among them they had four children, three boys and one girl. At first the couples were just good friends, but neither marriage was strong and both eventually failed at very nearly the same time. When Kathy and Bob began sleeping together, Jenkins called Mary

and told her what he had just learned from his eldest son, Manny, who phoned the minute he realized his mother was dating an old family friend.

Jenkins and Mary agreed to discuss things over dinner. It was innocent enough at first, their meeting. Perhaps to cry on each other's shoulders, perhaps because it would cement their friendship in a more fundamental way, one in which their exes were not involved, they ordered drinks, but they never did eat. In fact, they did not get much beyond cocktails before they found themselves in bed together. The commonality of the blow each suffered created a strong incentive to get even. They continued to see one another right up to the time their former spouses announced wedding plans.

Unfortunately, they had totally different outlooks on life. Jenkins was an introverted homebody who wanted nothing more than to create an environment his boys would desire to visit. Mary was a party-going extrovert who hired baby sitters by the lowest hourly rate they charged. The two were not meant to be together long.

Within six months of their coupling, Jenkins moved north to a city just below the Oregon border and married a woman several years his senior, while Mary remained in the lower half of the state and became a corporate executive.

Everyone's lives seemed fulfilled, their destinies played out. Jenkins arranged shared custody of his boys who grew to manhood while spending part of every summer vacation with him in Alaska and Mexico, Canada and most of America's national parks.

September visited her father regularly, but remained with her mother until she turned 18. At that time, she packed her things and moved to Washington to be with her adoring father, his new wife and her sons. Jenkins was completely out of her life by age seven.

Her father had a large house and she was given her own room. She dropped out of high school in Southern California, but took the Washington state equivalency test and passed. Armed with a general education degree, she began attending community college. She dropped out four times before she obtained enough units to go on to a four year college where she finally completed course work for an art degree. But instead of finding a job suited to her talents, of which her father insisted she had many, she became a waitress in small, family owned restaurants. She never moved out of the house, seemed stuck on the security her father and step-mother provided even as the boys moved away and started their own independent lives.

Meanwhile, the boys graduated college, got good and bad jobs, went into the construction industry, worked for a national camera company or, in Hal's case, took up the life of happy itinerancy. The older two married, propagated, bought homes on the East and West coasts while Hal bummed around the country staying with one or the other of his siblings whenever he broke up with another girlfriend. He had four places to choose from, if he counted his father in the north and his mother in the south, and sometimes he showed up and stayed with them.

Decades passed before Kathy finally decided to pay for her step-daughter's therapy sessions. After all, she reasoned, there had to be an explanation why the girl seemed so immature and Bob was never going to admit there might be a problem with his beloved daughter. September was arrested three times in possession of various narcotics and, by age 36, it seemed she was destined never to move out of the house. But her father could see no wrong and never said uncomplimentary things about her.

When the psychiatrist called and asked to have a meeting with September present, Kathy readily agreed. After months of expensive but seemingly useless psychotherapy, there would at last be a payoff. She and Bob sat on the sofa together opposite the doctor and her patient.

“You tell them, September,” the counselor said.

“Mommy, Daddy, I think I was molested when I was five or six years old.”

Bob gasped. Kathy was astounded. “You can’t be serious,” she said. When the girl nodded yes, she was serious, Kathy said, “You’re just now telling us this? Thirty years and you’re just now getting around to telling us this?”

“Allow me to explain,” the professional interjected. “This was a deeply repressed memory which I believe has had a long lasting and deleterious effect on your daughter. We used an hypnotic technique to elicit this information which only surfaced during our last session. Believe me, such revelations are not uncommon. Long ago unsolved murders have been reopened in this manner. Sexual abuse is one of the most common memories subverted by a child’s mind. It would go a long way toward explaining some of the problems September has experienced as an adult.”

Kathy felt a flow of emotions wash over her that went from surprise to denial to anger. Yet it was Bob who asked the obvious question, “By whom?”

“Kathy’s ex-husband, Jenkins.”

Both parents’ eyes grew the size of dinner plates and every evil fairy tale suddenly took on a life of its own. A wicked step-mother was nothing compared to a child molester.

They sat and listened and asked questions. September said she remembered now how Jenkins had sex with her numerous times, how she clearly recalled one night he raped her right after he had sex with her mother. She described him taking off his pants and -- At this point Kathy said she would not listen to any more of this, they would have to talk about it later. She needed time to analyze the news, to consider her options, perhaps to consult with an attorney or, if need be, call the police.

Ultimately, she did nothing like that. Instead, she wrote a letter to her sons who were also Jenkins' boys, explaining what September accused him of doing to their step-sister. Kathy avoided the graphic details September seemed so pleased to provide, but her letter was damning enough to consign Jenkins to the deepest rings of Dante's Inferno.

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The front door opened and David stood there with a pained expression on his face. "Dad. What are you doing here?"

"May I come in?" Jenkins asked without making a move. He had already told himself he would not pressure or presume on his son. David at last stepped aside and made a motion to indicate Jenkins should cross the threshold.

"Nobody's home but me, thank god. Carla is with the kids at her mom's. I stayed home over the weekend in order to get some song writing done. Sit down, but you can't stay."

Jenkins took a seat on a leather chair in the living room. David stood and hovered as if unable to make a decision. Finally, he said, "You haven't told me why you're here, in New York."

“I’m here on business, to see a publisher. Finally sold one of my books. Thought I’d take the opportunity to see you and Carla and the kids.

“You can’t do that.”

“You won’t let me see my grandchildren? You are my son, you know.”

“No, Dad. I’m not. Not any more. You know why.”

“I’m afraid I don’t.”

“The letter. The letter mom wrote.”

“I know of no letter. What did it say?”

“It tells how you did horrible things to September when she was just a baby.”

Jenkins sat as if thunderstruck. He reacted like he had just been punched, as if he was stunned and stupid and did not know how to defend himself. At last he said, “You have got to be joking. I did no such thing.”

“September says you did while you were seeing her mother. A psychiatrist discovered it as repressed memories and mom told us in a letter she wrote. That’s why I haven’t returned your phone calls or responded to your letters. Hal and Manny changed cell phones and won’t give you their new email addresses. That’s on purpose. In fact, I shouldn’t even be talking to you right now. Mom would kill me if she ever finds out.”

Jenkins knew the accusations were completely false, but he had no lawyer, no arbitrator, no one to intercede on his behalf.

“So that’s it. And you believe her? You think September’s telling the truth that I molested her? It never happened. I never touched her. And besides, that was decades ago when I dated her mother in Long Beach. Have you talked to Mary? Have you asked her? Has anyone defended me in this?”

David at last took a seat. He seemed on the brink of tears. It was as hard for him to confront his father with these charges as it was to read the letter Kathy sent.

“No, Dad. No one defended you. I don’t know if anyone called Mary and asked. We just didn’t know what else to do.”

Jenkins sat there and all of his 64 years came to bear as a heavy weight on his shoulders. He was no longer the young man who could spring back from such an indictment, who could fight these words of condemnation. His entire life, all his past deeds good or bad, were for nothing and he was crushed by the sudden collision with an explosive force that left him gasping for air, a drowning man with an instant of awareness before the current pulled him under. The instant of awareness was that he stood wrongly accused.

“May I see this letter?”

“I’m not supposed to show it to you.”

“For god’s sake, why not?”

“Because it’s personal. It’s not to you, it’s about you.”

“Which is why I should be allowed to read it. I need to know what these accusations are if I’m going to clear my name.”

Reluctantly, David retrieved the letter and showed it to his father. Jenkins read in silence, muttered a few imprecations as he did so.

“It says I molested her at her birthday party when she was wearing her favorite blue dress.”

“Yah, so?”

“So she didn’t have a blue dress. I know because Mary told me how much September hated the pink dress Mary insisted September wear at her birthday party. I wasn’t there, but I saw the photograph taken at the party and the dress was pink, not blue. And I think she did have a ribbon in her hair. But it was pink, too.”

David was thoughtful. Then he said, “Can you prove this?”

“What, that the dress was pink, not blue? Maybe. I don’t know if the photograph still exists. It was on the mantle in the old house in Long Beach. I only remember this because Mary told me September wanted to wear blue which Mary said everyone knows means it’s a boy. Girls wear pink, boys wear blue. September wanted blue anyway. It must have stuck in her mind that she was wearing the color she liked, not the color her mother wanted.”

“Yah, so?”

“Don’t you see? If September is wrong about the color of her dress, she sure as hell is wrong about the rest of her story. I never laid a finger on her and I’d swear to that on a stack of bibles.”

“Dad, uh, I don’t know what to say about all this. All I know is you have to leave because Carla is supposed to be home any minute and you can’t be around the kids. Dad. You understand?”

Jenkins stood with the letter in his hands. “I’ll go, but I need a copy of this. If I am ever to clear my name, I need a copy to show Mary.”

“Dad, I don’t know. It sounds like you could be right and I want to believe you, but I’ve talked to mom and she is really really angry with you. It’s almost as if all the problems they’ve had with September can be laid at your feet now that they know why. I

mean, September has always been a little out of control, even when we were growing up. She was always getting into dangerous spots, like riding her bike on the freeway I remember once. And she never talked nice about you, or her mother for that matter.”

“Make me a copy. OK? You have a computer and a printer. Scan it or make a copy, that’s all I ask. ”

David grabbed the piece of paper, left the room. He returned with two sheets, one of which he handed to his father.

“Now go.”

Jenkins did as his son commanded.

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A horrible acid developed in his stomach, rose in his throat and forced him to cough and spit on the street as Jenkins entered the subway to return to his hotel. It was a lovely end of summer day in New York, fall announcing its arrival without aggression, but he did not see it in that light. He saw the day as overcast and gray, cold and gusty, miserable to endure.

His mind was numbed by what he had heard and read and by his son’s reaction which was a condemnation Jenkins found particularly painful to bear. His mind was unable to grasp the implications of September’s outrageous claims without causing his body to shudder. He sat huddled, shrouded in his overcoat, shrunken inside the smallest private space he could occupy on the train seat which every New Yorker recognized as the personal barrier zone.

He would have wept except his emotions had passed beyond that simple solace point. Only in his room, where he made sure the door was locked and a Do Not Disturb

sign hung from the outside handle, was Jenkins able to shed tears unrestrained. He sobbed with a choking, chest rattling intensity, his body lurching in anguish as he mourned the no win situation in which he found himself. He lamented in this way for the rest of the afternoon and long after night darkened until he was finally able to fall asleep.

The next morning Jenkins phoned Mary, but all he got was her machine. He immediately made plans to fly to Los Angeles where he picked up a car and drove to the house in Palos Verdes. It was the first time he had ever been there. He knew corporate life had been good to her, but he marveled at the majesty of her existence when he stood on her front stoop after thirty years had passed and saw the size of her estate. It was enormous and grand even by Southern California conspicuous consumption standards.

It was late evening and the porch light was on. He rang the doorbell, attempted to straighten his attire, knew it was pointless after having flown five hours to pretend his clothing was fresh. However, that did not matter. Nothing mattered as long as he could talk with her, get her to agree that September was lying, or at the very least, fabricating a fabulous story out of the threads of that long ago relationship.

A man answered.

“Is Mary at home?”

“My wife is upstairs. Who shall I say is calling?”

“Just tell her Jenkins. She ought to know.”

There were footsteps behind the front door. Then it opened on a woman whom time had not touched. Or at least, that was Jenkins’ first impression.

She was slender, smartly dressed, smiling in the doorway as her hand reached to take his. “Why, what a surprise. When Donald said your name, I thought it couldn’t be anyone else. Come in, please.”

After a few pleasantries and Mary introducing Donald, Jenkins came to the point. “I’m afraid I have an errand of some pain to both of us. It concerns September. You are sort of my last resort.”

Jenkins glanced at Donald as if to suggest this was a private matter. Mary said, “I don’t keep secrets from my husband. Do, please go on.”

He explained as succinctly, as quickly as possible her daughter’s accusations. He asked if she had received a letter from Kathy and when she replied in the negative, he handed his copy to her. She read it with growing apprehension and animosity, her face clouding up and her lips pinching into a sour expression. Eventually, she folded the paper and passed it to Donald who read it quickly. He became visibly agitated and angered before holding it out away from his body like the repulsive missive it was.

“Is any of this true?” Donald asked before Mary could comment.

“Absolutely not. I never touched her. I have never had any interest in little girls. That’s just not in me.”

“But why would September say these things if there wasn’t some truth to them?”

This was what Jenkins had been asking himself for the last 24 hours. What prompted someone who was, what, nearly 40? What prompted someone that old to besmirch another with such reprehensible lies and falsehoods? He had no answer, but asked Mary, “Do you remember the photo of September at her fourth birthday, the one you used to have on the mantle? Where she’s wearing her party dress?”

“Of course I still have it. Why? Do you want to see it?”

“It would help if you showed it to me, yes.”

Mary rose and went into the dining room. She rifled a few drawers in a large Chesterfield, shuffled their contents, picked something out from amid the collected detritus of a lifetime and returned to the living room with a small picture frame in her hand.

“You mean this one?”

The image turned up in his hands and Jenkins blanched. He was visibly shaken by what he saw and Donald made a motion to catch him as if Jenkins were about to fall out of his chair.

Staring up at him with a bright smile and a birthday cake on the table next to her, four candles having just been blown out as wisps of smoke visibly rose in the air, a blonde haired September at a much happier age wore a green polka dot dress with matching pillbox hat.

There were no ribbons in her hair.

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