

G.L. MIND

Mothercraft

... the key function of human rights language is to keep us aware of the gap between what we say and think.

—Michael Ignatieff

MY FATHER'S CHIEF HERO was Isaiah Berlin. Next down his list was Lester Pearson, the Canadian Prime Minister who won the Nobel Prize for Peace. My mother loved many public figures, all of whom had been dedicated to the protection and betterment of other human beings. Eleanor Roosevelt was particularly dear to her heart. She admired women who had struggled for improvement of human conditions and the protection of human rights. Towards the end of her life, my mother developed an unmistakable crush on Hillary Clinton. My parents were both Left, but they were neither soft nor wild. They never belonged, not ever, to the Loony Left. My father would never have admired a terrorist, nor anyone who preferred murder to reason, death to the life of reason. He would have loathed the contemporary Left tendency to shut down debate and to silence others whose positions have been rejected in advance. He would often be angry, frustrated and furious over some official act of repression clothed in jingoism and deceit, but he never howled in public. He would never have blown whistles or rung cowbells to silence an opponent. Allow everyone her voice, he would say. Hear her argument. The freedom to speak, to argue and to defend one's position were, my father believed, chief among human rights. All my childhood upbringing turned, in thousands of small ways, upon my education in human rights.

Human rights were central. Inhuman punishments, torture, the death penalty, gratuitous wars, the mistreatment of refugees, slavery, legal (or religious) mutilations, every degradation of hu-

manity, including the silencing of speech, each action founded upon the assumption that people had no rights, or had somehow lost them, filled my mother and father with fury. Their belief in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights gave our family an almost religious tone. (They believed in the United Nations Charter too, but the Universal Declaration, aimed at the rights of individual human beings, not states, was always closest to their hearts.) My parents both belonged to Amnesty International and to Human Rights Watch. I remember them both, from my earliest childhood, writing cheques and letters on behalf of men and women convicted unjustly in brutal third-world states and for others who had been condemned to death, an abominable punishment, in our own country. The Enlightenment, the Rights of Man, the philosopher Immanuel Kant were familial touchstones: treat every person as a subject, not as an object; treat every person as an end, not as a means. Respect the selfhood of the other. A picture of Kant hung next to one of Thomas Paine in my father's study.

My mother's variation upon the family religion was to insist that everyone had a story, a side in every argument, a position to be understood. Grant everyone her own subjectivity, she liked to say. Listen to her story. I remember asking her, If someone bores you, how you can listen to her story? I asked, Aren't some acts so evil that there is no position, no argument to be understood? I asked, Don't some people commit such horrible acts that it is impossible to consider their subjectivity? Should I bear Hitler's subjectivity in mind when I try to imagine the costs of the war and genocide he began? Stalin's? Must I respect Pol Pot? If someone causes me harm, acts with malice towards me, must I respect her selfhood? Yes, my mother would answer, unswerving in her convictions, you owe that to yourself, to your idea of humankind, to all that you believe in. Yes, you must always strive to understand the other person's mind, even if she has hurt you. Yes, everyone is a subject and you must always incorporate that fact into your awareness.

My childhood's lessons were tested in radical manner the year that I turned twenty-eight. My husband had accepted a visiting position at the University of Oregon. We had a wonderful sab-batical house in the hills. I enjoyed the change and I came to love Eugene, a small university city as lovely as it is laid-back. Nick taught his classes and began writing a book. I walked a great deal,

joined an aerobics class and looked after Josee, our six-year-old daughter. She went to kindergarten and played endlessly. We both read to her. Nick read her *The Hobbit* while we lived in Eugene. I read fairy tales and traditional folk stories. Often on weekends and when there was no school I would take her walking with me. She was always indefatigable. It was an extremely happy interlude in our existence.

One Sunday morning in May, I took Josee hiking up Spencer Butte, a wooded hill in a forest park immediately south of the city. I had climbed it twice before and I knew that the view from the summit was spectacular. I wanted Josee to make the climb for the experience of hiking, but most of all I wanted her to see Eugene from the summit's high, bird's-eye perspective. I dressed her in purple Oshkosh-By-Gosh overalls and her new black walking shoes, which she loved because they looked like Doc Martens.

The path up wound sharply through a pine forest. It was a steep climb, but easily within Josee's abilities. Towards the top, the path kept getting lost in a scatter of boulders, splitting and feathering into non-existence like a wave breaking over a rocky shore. Josee and I made a game out of scrambling. I had persuaded Josee to climb that far by making everything a game. At the beginning of the trail there had been a metal sign, nailed to a tree, that warned of hazards ahead, poison oak, two rattlesnakes, three fallen trees. I made Josee see how absurd the sign was. Two snakes? Three trees? Using very simple terms, I explained the nature of a Chinese Catalogue, a series without reason, examples lacking point. And so, slowly, we reached the summit, laughing and playing games. Let's pretend, and Josee would start us off on a new adventure. When we stood together on the summit, I felt exhilarated, but also exhausted. Josee was laughing and running back and forth from rock to rock. The view was wonderful. I pointed out the small hills and valleys. Everything was marvellously green, though there seemed to be a hundred shades at least. It was, as I remember it, like an imagined fantasy land, as Far Cogaigue might have seemed. While we were taking in the view and I was pointing out landmarks, I noticed a man wearing a wide-brimmed black leather hat looking towards downtown Eugene with a pair of binoculars. I didn't speak to him. He didn't look at us. When I glanced in his direction again, he had vanished.

In the forest, there were countless fern tussocks and moss-covered rocks among the close-together pine trees. Coming down, we took our time so that I could teach Josee about ferns. I noticed a sign that indicated it was half a mile back to the parking lot. There was another trail branching off that led downwards into the forest, but the sign suggested it would follow a ridge. I guessed that it might be a loop. But chose not to follow it. I wanted the shortest, least problematic way home. Forty or fifty feet beyond the sign, the path curved to the right. It made a well-constructed curlicue and then straightened out for the descent to the parking lot.

At just the point where the path curved, the man with the black leather hat stepped behind me. He pressed a knife into the back of my neck. "I have a gun, too," he said, "but I can kill you with this knife. Keep quiet and come with me." Josee had run ahead. I called her, my voice cracking, "Josee, Josee, come here." When she came back, eyeing the strange man suspiciously, I said, "Keep quiet, sweetheart. We have to go with this man." We walked ahead of him, to the right and, through bushes, ferns and long grass, up the slope of the butte. When we were high enough to be completely out of sight of the path, the man stopped. He placed Josee behind a tree twenty or thirty feet above us so that, leaning back against the tree, she faced up the hill. She was crying now. She had a prescient awareness that something bad was going to happen. "Keep quiet," the man said, and pressed the point of the knife into my rib cage. "Don't look at me," he ordered. He raised his voice a little, telling Josee to keep quiet and not to look. "Tell her not to look," he commanded. "Honey, sweets, don't look at us. Just look up the hill and watch for squirrels and chipmunks."

Josee whimpered. But she was obedient. She didn't look. I could hear her crying. She made a continuous snuffling noise, broken by little sobs. "Don't look." The man seemed oddly worried that she might see us. "Tell her not to look." For as long as it lasted, the man kept telling me to warn my daughter not to look. For as long as it lasted, I kept calling softly to Josee, "Don't look. Don't turn around. Mummy is busy."

The man told me to scrunch my eyes tight. I mustn't see him. And, in fact, I never had a clear idea what he looked like. Later, all I could tell the detectives was that he was old, or older, or anyway not young. He had some grey hair near his ears. He kept his black hat on the whole time. As far as I could tell, he must have

been between forty and seventy. He didn't try to kiss me. As soon as he had settled Josee behind the tree, he immediately reached out and felt my breasts. He hoisted my sweater up and tugged my bra. "Unhook it," he ordered. I did exactly what he asked. He unbuttoned my jeans and ran his fingers under the elastic of my panties, tentatively, like a man buying a small animal, pulling the band out and letting it plop softly back. "Keep quiet," he insisted once more. "Tell her not to look. What's her name?" "Josee." "Is that a nickname?" "No, just a girl's name."

At first, I was more frightened than really angry. All my mental energy went into worrying about Josee. I was afraid that the man would kill me and then rape Josee. That seemed like a very reasonable expectation. All my lifelong templates of male behaviour were playing through my mind. A man, I felt certain, would always prefer to rape a little girl rather than her mother. Then, as he took my clothes off, I began to hope that he would leave Josee alone. Maybe I could satisfy him enough to make Josee safe. From the moment he had touched my neck with his knife, I had thought, hoped rather, that if I co-operated and let him rape me without a struggle, then he wouldn't hurt Josee. I believed that I was doing the right thing in co-operating. I was acting, I told myself, as a mother animal might, attempting to draw a predator away from the litter. I was still afraid that he might kill her. It still seemed possible that he would. Should I call out to Josee and order her to run? Would she? Wouldn't she only whine and ask why. "Why Mummy? I can't." And she wouldn't know where to run. Down? Now I began to feel anger and resentment. This man had ruined my outing with Josee. He had frightened my daughter. He might have left a psychological trauma that would take a lifetime to correct, even to repress. He was going to leave me with a corrosive sense of humiliation. It seemed less important at the moment, but I knew that he was also going to hurt me. I dreaded the moment when he would enter me. (Later, I realized how utterly hideous it would have been if he had sodomized me, but at the time I didn't think about that.) I worried that I might not lubricate. I wanted to lubricate, even though, with the force of my whole being, I hated the idea of being raped. But I wanted to lubricate desperately. I was afraid of pain. Fiercely, I willed myself to wetten. Would he get angry if I touched myself?

The man unknotted my hiking boots and yanked them off. "Pull your pants down," he commanded. I slipped my jeans and panties down in one motion. I sensed him staring hungrily at my crotch. I felt terribly exposed. Even when I had been a girl undressing for my boyfriends, I had never felt so exposed, so piteously naked. I was fully open now to his hostile eyes. I recall wincing as if I were about to be hit. I kept my eyes squeezed shut. He seemed to be devouring my crotch. The sensation of wincing became overpowering. I lay still, unmoving, but I felt skittish and withdrawing. I thought that I could feel his eyes. "Tell her not to look," he commanded again. I hoped that someone would come up the path and see us. Then I realized that, even if anyone saw us, which would be unlikely, the situation would be obscure. Only a horny couple screwing. And Josee, behind the tree, would be invisible. If anyone intervened, the man might become violent. If he did, really, have a gun, he might shoot us all. He would certainly stab me.

The man continued staring at me. He was silent, but I felt his intensity. I was still mentally wincing. "It looks awfully nice," he said softly. It sounded absurd, like an executioner complimenting the condemned woman on her neck. He bent close to me and I smelled the freshness of apple on his breath. He rubbed the knife softly against my cheek. "Keep quiet." And then, "a knife is very righteous." I didn't understand. He rubbed the knife against my cheek and left ear. "I just want simplicity," he said. I kept my eyes tight. "I'm sorry about this, but I just want simplicity." I understood that comment to be a veiled threat should I try to resist. He touched me, but only briefly. I felt a little squeeze, a momentary stroking, his finger poking about. Then he seemed to straighten up. He pulled something from a pocket. Then I heard him tearing a piece of paper. He was opening something. I thought, My God, he is putting on something to hurt me. Then I thought, No, he must be putting on a French tickler, or something like that. He wants to excite me, to make me respond. The idea was horrible. I was still worrying that I wouldn't lubricate in time.

There was a short silence while he messed about with himself. Maybe he was only fitting a condom. Then he said, "Tell her not to cry." I called out, "Josee, sweets, don't cry. Mummy is all right. We won't be long." I bent my legs open, even without being commanded, waiting. It was the classic gesture of female submis-

sion, horrible and humiliating in the moment. Afterwards, it was this move of compliance that most bothered the detective and most upset my friends. No one understood why I did that. Everyone thought that I should have resisted with all my strength, and certainly not have submitted so easily. "You should have fought," my best friend would say when I told her how it had happened. "I would have died defending myself," she said, with all the ease of an observer. Bending my legs open had been an ugly act, but I had done it because it seemed necessary. I thought that it was important to do, necessary, a final action to draw this man away from Josee. Then he whispered, his voice nearly inaudible, "It's gorgeous." What? I wondered. Me? "I need simplicity," he sighed, exhaling in a sad, low-keyed manner. When he began moving inside me, I couldn't feel the device. I could tell that he wasn't wearing a condom. He didn't seem to be wearing anything. What was the device he had fitted? It took a long time, much too long. I bit my lower lip struggling to keep from making noises so that Josee wouldn't hear me gasping, or making even uglier sounds. All the time Josee snuffled and gave tiny sobs. She couldn't have known what was happening. She only knew that something bad, something that had happened suddenly and without warning, was being done to her mother. Her snuffles were mercifully soft and grew fainter. Then the man ejaculated into me. Drops of his sweat had fallen on my face. He was panting heavily. The rape must have taken fifteen, perhaps twenty minutes. Several people had gone up and down the path without noticing us. Now I was glad that no one had seen us. It was over and it hadn't actually hurt, physically. I was still alive. Josee would not be raped now, but I knew the man might still hurt her. He could easily kill us both, even though I had submitted without resistance. I didn't actually think that he would. For the first time, my mind ranging ahead, I imagined the incredible hassle of calling the police, of going to the hospital, of enduring a pelvic examination, of the brutal evidentiary investigation of a rape kit. For the first time, I imagined telling Nick. Oh, honey, guess what? Some guy raped me today.

The man said, "Wait ten minutes before you get dressed and leave." He went over to Josee and said, "You can go and kiss your mama now. Go and kiss her." Then he was gone. He walked confidently through the high fern tussocks, his wide-brimmed black hat still on, lean and vigorous with a thin, quick stride. Then he vanished.

“He took a lot of chances,” the detective said. “He left his DNA behind. Didn’t care. We’ll check, so far as we can, but I wouldn’t bet on finding him that way. He was pretty confident we couldn’t find him.” No one had seen him on the trail. He must have cut off down a small trail into the valley, or doubled around to take the ridge trail to Fox Hollow Road where he might have parked his car. But no one had seen him there, or anywhere. Nick was outraged. He stormed around calling the disappeared assailant bitter names. “A piece of shit. A scumbag.” Nick, the cautious academic, thin, wiry, with no excess bulk, talked revenge and retribution. But there seemed to be no clues. My rapist had vanished.

I had been extremely precise about the place on the trail where the man had assaulted me. “Just past the sign giving the distance to the summit in one direction and the parking lot in the other,” I explained to the detectives. “Just where the path curves and goes into a neat curlicue.” The man had marched us quickly up the slope through the ferns and dry grass to some dead, or dying, pine trees with their branches draped in moss. I could envision each step clearly, each tussock, the dry trees, the moss. The detectives had been able to find the place easily. Now the lead detective, a young woman, told me that they had discovered some evidence. The man had opened a syringe package and fitted a needle. The plastic sleeve that held the needle had been on the ground. He must have put the syringe and the rest of the package in his pocket. That had been the device I had imagined. Whatever it was, it had been for him, not for me. What had it been? Cocaine? An opium derivative? “Maybe,” the detective said. “We’re still looking for more evidence. The lab is working out the possibilities.”

I was deeply disturbed, but less over the actual rape than for the trauma I feared Josee had experienced. How would I explain what had happened? A bad man hurt mummy? A bad man did something to mummy that only daddy has the right to do? But that sounded terribly cold. It reduced love to a legal right, a simplification which I didn’t believe and which I would have fiercely rejected if someone else had made the argument. It also made me seem too much a victim. I wanted my daughter to think that I had acted so passively in order to save us both. I had acted as mother animals and birds do, distracting predators from their children by offering themselves. I hadn’t been really passive, but, like a mother bird running away from her nest, active, making herself vulnerable

in order to deceive. I didn't think that I had been simply a passive victim. I had acted with courage to save my daughter's life. Yet no one, not Nick, not my best friend, and not even the female detective, believed that I had acted as I should. I felt extremely isolated and alone.

I decided that I would tell Josee that a bad man made mummy do something that she only wants to do with daddy. The whole time I had striven to keep Josee safe. I had done what the bad man asked because I didn't want to make him angry. He had that knife, remember? Would that make things seem too dangerous? Would it increase Josee's fear and her trauma at being threatened? I hoped not, but I was determined to make my case to my daughter, to make her understand that I had acted consciously and not out of simple fear, even if no one else would agree. Five days after the rape occurred, while I was still struggling to find the best way to explain things to Josee, the detective stopped by for the last time.

She acted towards me as she had from the first, polite but distant. Clearly, she didn't like me much and did not feel sympathy. She, too, must have believed that I should have fought with the rapist. We sat alone in the living room of the rented house. She was fighting to repress a smile. Forensics had decided that the man probably injected himself with prostaglandin, a hormone that has many uses, one of which is to enable penile erections. A man who suffers erectile dysfunction takes his flaccid penis in one hand and injects a syringe of prostaglandin with the other. The hormone is injected directly into the *corpus cavernosa*, the spongy core of the penis that engorges with blood when it stiffens. The detective's lips edged towards a tiny smile. "Doctors," she remarked, "sometimes call it 'magic hard-on'." The length of time that it had taken him to ejaculate showed that he had probably self-injected prostaglandin. Delay in ejaculation was a common side-effect. The man had been impotent, but he had still managed to rape me while I, lying with my legs invitingly open and my eyes scrunched shut, had offered myself so co-operatively. Clearly, the detective believed that I ought to have defended myself against a man who had been weak. Without my co-operation he would have been incapable.

"What a pathetic piece of shit," Nick raged. Being whipped to death would be too good. But I wondered at the man's consciousness while he raped me. Was he thinking, I have become something ludicrous, something pathetic? And then, a beam of light,

a bulb flaring suddenly above my head, I abruptly realized that when the man had said, "I just want simplicity, I need simplicity," I had misheard him. He must have said, "I just want some pussy." "I'm sorry," he had said, "but I need some pussy." He had needed a woman's vagina, mine that day, to satisfy his sexual needs. But he had also needed to show himself that he could still master a female body, that he was still himself, a man. For the first time, my anger and hate were modified by compassion. Not that I could forgive him, or that I would not have wanted him to be caught and punished, but I did begin to understand his subjectivity. It had been a complicated and frightening moment for him. He had risked capture and imprisonment, but also embarrassment and humiliation. That was why he had kept insisting that I keep my eyes shut. He had insisted that Josee not see us both because he wanted all eyes turned away, keeping them from seeing him perform the humiliating action, but also to minimize her trauma, to protect her as much as possible within the situation he had created. Even while he was doing something unspeakably horrible, he had worried about the consequences for Josee if she saw her mother being raped. He had displayed a touch of compassion even while violating me. My own mother would have insisted that he had his story to tell, and that he deserved being understood just like anyone else. She would have called him a 'poor thing,' and urged understanding and compassion. Try to imagine his story. Try to imagine his subjectivity at the moment when he hurt you. When he had laid the knife against my cheek, he had not been threatening me with death, but only trying to intimidate me into not looking. The rapist had not wanted to be seen, not to make identification harder, but to avoid the humiliation of being seen so deflated.

During the whole sordid episode, I had acted consistently as my mother's daughter. I had remained calm and rational, making my decisions as a confident, intelligent woman. Using guile and self-sacrifice, I had fought to protect my own daughter. Now I was being tested on how well I remembered my childhood lessons in the theory of human rights. I heard my mother's voice and felt her eyes upon me. Can you hear him? she asked. Do you understand? Could you tell his story? Could you make someone else understand? Feel sympathy for him? I guessed that I would pass the test, but that everyone, the police detective, my husband, even my best friend, would have wished me to fail.