VIOLET'S SEEDS

This narrative provides reflections by a social worker in mid career on a painful and significant encounter with one of his first clients in London over 20 years ago. Themes of loss, guilt, trauma are uncovered along with an exploration of the meaning and transformation of a helping relationship.

by Joshua Miller

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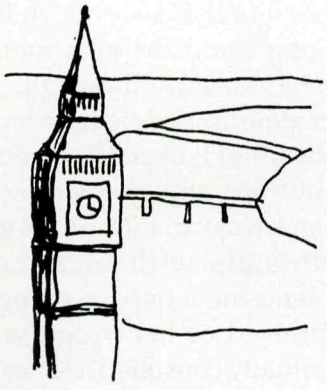
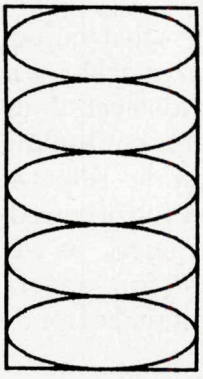


Sometimes things happen in your life that change you forever — things that were not anticipated or expected. This is such a story.

In the mid-1970's, I received my MSW from the University of Washington and was assuming that I would spend the rest of my life living and working in the splendid city of Seattle. But a professor of mine, Fred Lewin, who had just returned from a year's sabbatical in England, suggested that I try working in London. The English social service system had recently been reorganized to a generic model, administered by local authorities (like counties or boroughs), and most significantly, there was a critical shortage of trained social workers. Fred gave me some contacts to whom I wrote.

I was surprised when the Assistant Director of Social Services for a South London borough wrote back to me, offering me a six month's probationary job, sight unseen. How could I turn this offer down? I was 25, unattached, not yet professionally grounded, and living and working in Europe sounded romantic and exciting. So I figured that I would go and work for a year, do a bit of traveling, and then return to my home in the Pacific Northwest.



Within 6 months my work permit had arrived, clearing me for employment and in a snowstorm on April 1, I departed by Icelandic Air lines to London.

The social service department for the borough was located in a Town Hall that housed a variety of municipal services. My team covered a vibrant township in the borough that housed Africans, East and West Indians, migrants from Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, as well as an ensconced indigenous working class population. There was a thriving High Street, dotted with pubs and Indian restaurants, lined with street vendors animatedly hawking fruit and vegetables.

There were five social workers on the team, two social work aides, a sector clerk, and the team leader, who was a Senior Social Worker. There were an Italian social worker and a German social work aide on the team, and shortly after I arrived, a Swedish social worker, so we were soon nicknamed the "International Brigade." Within a few weeks, I had clients with mental illness, people with

physical disabilities, couples suspected of abusing their children, adolescents who had run away or had broken the law, and many homeless people. A caseload averaged between 25 and 40 cases. There were few other social service resources (no community mental health centers, scarcely any social service agencies) so that the local authority social worker was expected to provide everything: case management, counseling, information and referral, advocacy, supervision of custody orders, and groupwork, as well as evaluations for special apartments or equipment for the disabled.

Many of my clients were assigned to me when I was a "duty worker," doing intake for new cases, and many were homeless. There was a severe housing shortage in London at this time, but there was also a statutory obligation to house homeless families with children. Social workers were expected to assess whether or not there was, indeed, a homeless family with children and no other options, and then place the family in a temporary shelter, usually a bed and breakfast hostel. Families waited months, even years, before being offered permanent housing in state owned units known as "council housing."

VIOLET

In early May, I met Violet Johnson while serving as a duty worker. It was a random chance that she became my client. Violet

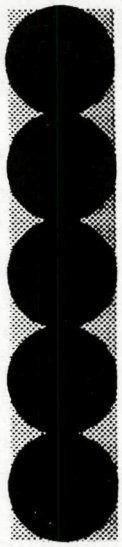
declared herself to be homeless and asked for my help in resettling her and her six children. She was not only asking for help with housing; she was concerned for her life and for the safety of her children.

Violet was an attractive but haggard looking woman in her late 30's. She was dark skinned, with high cheek bones and dark, solemn eyes. She had been born in a West Indian country but had been living in London for about 12 years. Her parents were of African, East Indian, and European descent. There was a mixture of fear, resignation, defiance, and maternal love in her story as she spoke. Her husband, and the father of her six children (aged 5 to 16), had severely beaten her and was at home with the six children. The beating was part of a recurring pattern, and she had finally decided to leave. She was concerned that if her husband found her, he would kill her, and she was also fearful that he would mistreat her six children. However, she was adamant that I should not visit him. Her reasoning was that he would be charming and respectful to me, but he would then take out his anger on the children after I left.

Violet was accompanied by a family friend, Mr. Andrews, who was from the same West Indian country. He confirmed her story and attested to the risks of my visiting Mr. Johnson to check on the children. We worked out a plan. He would visit the house and the children on a daily basis, and I would phone the children's school. I would ask that the Education Welfare Officer visit the home if any of the children were absent. Violet was going to stay with her parents and would stay in contact with me. The plan was for her to collect her children eventually and then to be rehoused in a location where her husband would be unable to find her.

For the next month and a half, Violet lived with friends and her parents. Mr. Andrews visited the home regularly. I phoned the schools on a weekly basis. At my request, the Education Welfare Officer made a home visit and reported, Mr. Johnson is a charming man and that the children seemed to be well cared for. Violet and I would meet on a weekly basis. She had had to leave her job at a government agency because her husband worked there. We discussed her plans to seek new employment, her financial situation, her anguish over her children being cared for by a man whom she viewed as dangerous, and her determination to leave him. She often looked tired and weak, but her will was strong. When she was unable to keep appointments with me, she would send me letters, keeping me appraised of her progress. She eventually consulted a solici-

tor (lawyer) and took out a summons against her husband for persistent cruelty and sought custody and care and maintenance of her children. She was advised that she could not take out a restraining order against him unless she was first attacked and the police were called to the scene.



A few days after the summons was served, Violet came to my office with her oldest child, her daughter Kate. Kate was a tall, thin 16 year old with short, tightly curled hair. Violet asked Kate to show me some bruises on her chest that she alleged had been inflicted by Mr. Johnson. Kate timidly complied. I saw some dark bruises that could have been inflicted by hard slaps or punches. Earlier that day, Kate had gone to her maternal grandparents' house and had reported how her father had beaten her and her sister Laura.

Violet had immediately gone to the children's schools, removed all of them, and took them to her parents' apartment in an adjacent South London borough. After we consulted with my supervisor, all parties agreed that Violet would immediately go to court and seek custody of the children, rather than have the local authority seek a Care and Protection Order.

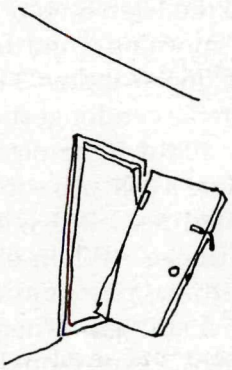
Two days later I accompanied Violet to her court hearing. Unable to sit with Violet, I observed the proceedings from the gallery. It was the first time that I had seen Mark Johnson, her husband. He was a tall, handsome, tan skinned man, also originally from the West Indies; he was dressed in a suit. Violet made a deliberate and detailed presentation of their relationship together. They had met and been married in the West Indies. Their three eldest children had been born there before they immigrated to England. She described how he became increasingly violent toward her, often forcing himself on her sexually. When she was pregnant with her fourth child, she was severely beaten by him. The child was born with profound deafness.

Violet described how the violence escalated and was directed toward the children as well as herself. The courtroom was gravely silent as she described being knocked unconscious by Mark and raped in front of the children, and another time being raped with a Coca Cola bottle. I watched Mark as Violet related all this. The left side of his face twitched rhythmically and uncontrollably. I thought to myself, "He can't take this; his self concept doesn't allow for this; he is going to explode." With the exception of the twitching, he stood stoically. The hearing was continued with Violet being granted temporary care and custody of the children.

Night

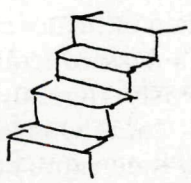
Two and one half weeks later, Violet was putting her children to bed at about 10 P.M. on the second floor of her parents' apartment. There was a knock at the door. Violet started down the stairs to open it. Kate followed her, cautioning her not to open the door in case it was Mark. Violet reassured her that she would keep the door on the chain to see who was there.

She latched the chain and opened the door. With a tremendous crack, the door flew open, the chain dangling lifelessly. Mark burst in. Violet screamed.



The remaining children ran to the top of the stairs and started to scream. Mark slammed Violet's head from one wall to another. Then he pulled out the Stanley knife and hammer head that he had been carrying in his pockets and slashed and beat her. Kate tried to intervene and was cut on her hand by the knife.

Mark dropped Violet's limp and bloody body and said to Kate: "Come with me." He took her by the hand and started



to walk down the street with glazed eyes. A few minutes later, a police car pulled up, and Mark was arrested without a struggle. The next day, he was charged with the murder of Violet Johnson.

INNER CITY BLUES

I was sitting at my desk in my team room two days later. We had recently moved out of the gloomy town hall into an area office building that overlooked the High Street. It was a sunny morning, and from my second floor window, I watched a vegetable vendor gesticulating wildly about tomatoes when I took Kate's call. As soon as she identified herself, I felt everything freeze. When she said, "Something has happened to Mom," I still asked her, "What happened?" even though I knew what she was about to tell me.

When I asked Kate if the family would like me to visit that day, she said "Yes." When I arrived, I met all of the children, Violet's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Patel, as well as some family friends, including Mr. Andrews.

Let me briefly describe the family for you. Kate was a very verbal, intelligent 16 year old, an A student and very much the eldest child. Laura, who was 15 at the time, and Sandy, who was one week shy of her 14th birthday, looked more like each other physically, with a strong East Indian influence in contrast to Kate's African features, and were closely aligned with one another. Laura was less outgoing than Kate, more guarded in her demeanor, while Sandy, who looked strikingly like Violet, had a miserable cold and was withdrawn.

Markie was 11, thin, and looked a lot like his namesake, his father. He could barely lip read and was comprehensible only if one stood very close to him and listened attentively. He could not sign. With all of the commotion in the house, he was alert (like a cat listening to rapid noises coming from all directions) but not in direct communication with people. That situation persisted over the next few weeks and, to some extent, for the next few years.

Julie was a gap-toothed six year old with an open face and a winning smile. She was precociously bright and inquisitive. She wore her thick curly hair in pigtails. Peter was an intense, tiny, finely featured 5 year old.

Mr. Patel was an alert man, of East Indian origin in his 70's but weakened from a number of debilitating strokes. He had been the Minister of Health in the West Indian country that he came from and had been awarded an Order of the British Empire. He had his own room and spent much of his time in bed.

Mrs. Patel was a large, imposing woman, who worked weekends as a domestic in a hospital. She was recovering from a recent hysterectomy. She was outspoken and had strong opinions about people. She drank heavily. She was the most openly distraught over Violet's death: weeping, at times shrieking or wailing hysterically, and also expressing her fear and anger toward Mark.

I stayed at the apartment for hours, meeting with each person individually and also conferring with many of the family friends who were present. With the exception of Mr. Andrews and his wife, who were concerned and supportive toward the Patels, many of the friends would grill me about the "psychological dynamics" of the event, and expressed some sympathy towards Mark's position. By the end of the meetings, despite my own shock and sense of failure at having been unable to protect Violet, I had a clear sense that the Patels were prepared to care for the children and that the highest priority for the children was that they remain together, preferably with the Patels. There was one major problem: neither I nor the Patels had the authority to make that decision.

The Patels lived in a different borough from the one where Violet had lived. The new borough assigned a social worker, Jen Nielson who was feeling overwhelmed by the situation and was finding her borough bureaucracy unsupportive. Her superiors did not want to take custody of the children and be encumbered with the obligations that this would entail. She already had a large caseload and did not yet have a personal connection with the family.

I, on the other hand, was concerned that my relationship with the family would cease. I felt that the family had begun to establish a relationship with me, based on my work with Violet. I

also felt an overwhelming sense of obligation to help the children and the Patels, some of this emanating from my sense of guilt and inadequacy over Violet's death. I had been her social worker, she had warned me that this could happen, and it had.

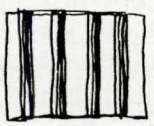
Jen and I struck a deal. She would be the official representative of the state, the outside social worker, who would monitor the legal situation. I would be the inside social worker and provide counseling and advocacy. We would share the case management and meet regularly. We presented the plan to the family and they readily agreed. Our respective boroughs also supported the plan, and I received a tremendous support from my supervisor, who recognized the importance of my continued involvement with the family for them and for me, despite the official termination of the borough's responsibility.

Jen and I also came to share an assumption that became a guiding principle in our work with the family: it was paramount for the children to remain together as a unit and not be placed separately in foster homes. They had in one violent act lost both of their parents, and they were adamant that they would not be separated. There were no foster homes that could take all of the children. There were two maternal uncles: one lived in the U.S. and had a large family of his own, and the other was a single man in his 20's; neither was in a position to care for the children. The family friends quickly drifted away, with the exception of the Andrews, and they could not take the children. This left the Patels.

The Patels were committed to caring for their grandchildren. The two generations, Violet's parents and her children, were bound together in their loss of her and maintained their continued relationship with her through each other. But there were enormous obstacles. The Patels were in poor health and at their age were not expecting to care for six children. Their flat was overcrowded. The four girls shared two beds in one room. Peter slept with Mr. Patel. Markie had to share a room with an elderly boarder, for whom Mrs. Patel was caring and with whom she had some kind of relationship. Within weeks, their landlord threatened them with eviction due to overcrowding.

There were other problems as well. Mr. and Mrs. Patel led parallel, separate lives and sometimes would denigrate one another in front of the children. Mrs. Patel would also accuse some of the children of having the "Johnson in them," particularly directing this at Markie, and to a lesser extent, Laura. She would also frequently harangue the children and was very preoccupied with her own needs. This was by no means an ideal situation, but all of us — Jen, I, the Patels, and the children — felt it was the best alternative available. An unspoken assumption, I believe, was that this was what Violet would have wanted as well.

It was not what Mark Johnson wanted, however. Although he was in prison, he technically had custody and wanted the children placed in foster homes rather than with the Patels. The borough was reluctant to assume the burden of taking custody of the children who were, therefore, made wards of the court, with supervision being given to the Patels. This gave the Patels limited financial resources to care for the children: Mr. Patel's pension, Mrs. Patel's meager wages, supplementary benefits for the children, and the income from the boarder. Eventually, after much advocacy and pressure, the Patel's borough took custody of the children 10 months after Violet's death, keeping them with their grandparents. More resources were then available, including a larger council house.



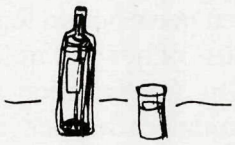
Jen and I visited Mr. Johnson in prison to discuss the situation with him. He struck me as an intelligent, charismatic man, who radiated an ineluctable destructiveness. He was furious about the arrangements and insisted that the children visit him. He refused to accept that the children did not want to visit him. He hated Mrs. Patel and blamed her for Violet's "provocative" behavior. He blamed me for Violet's death because I had never visited him and tried to help them work things out. He blamed Violet for her death because of the; "awful, untrue things she said about me in

court." He blamed Jen for not forcing the children to see him.

Jen and I left the visit stunned and shaken. We reenacted this ordeal on a monthly basis as Mr. Johnson repeatedly demanded, through his lawyer, that the children visit him in prison. We patiently tried to explain why the children did not want to visit him and why we had placed them with the Patels. Jen and I were both relieved to have each other's company during these traumatizing encounters.

Mrs. Patel expressed fears to me, in front of the children, that Mr. Johnson would be released from prison and would kill her. There was also a family rumor that friends of Mr. Johnson might try and kidnap the children.

From the time of my first visit to the home, after Violet's death, I had worked out an intensive visiting schedule with the family at home and at the schools of the younger children. At the home visits I would see Mr. and Mrs. Patel individually and also meet with the three older girls as a group. The group meetings focussed on shared reactions and ways that they could support themselves and their younger siblings. I would also touch base with the younger children at home. The family work involved a great deal of ventilation, clarification, and mediation. Obviously, grief work was a central theme in most of the sessions. But I also had to work on very concrete concerns with the grandparents, such as finances, the housing situation, the children's schoolwork. It was not possible to have the entire family sit together with me for sessions, and I did not try to push this. Rather, we would work in linked sub-units.



Much of my work with Mrs. Patel involved her grieving, but I also tried to mediate and buffer her destructive projections on to the children of her hatred of Mark. I, as well, had to confront her about her drinking and yelling at the children. With Mr. Patel, we developed a father and son type of relationship. I relied on him to provide consistent limits and support for the children despite the fact that he was frequently bed-ridden. He developed a deep relationship with Peter, and to a lesser extent, with Julie. They were often in his bedroom doing their homework. I experienced him as a wise and gentle presence.

A great deal of conflict surfaced during my visits, usually between Mrs. Patel and the children. Tension would also erupt among the children. I would try to mediate but would leave each visit with at least one of the older girls not speaking to me. Fortunately, I managed to offend everyone more or less equally and was able to maintain my individual connections with all of the children.

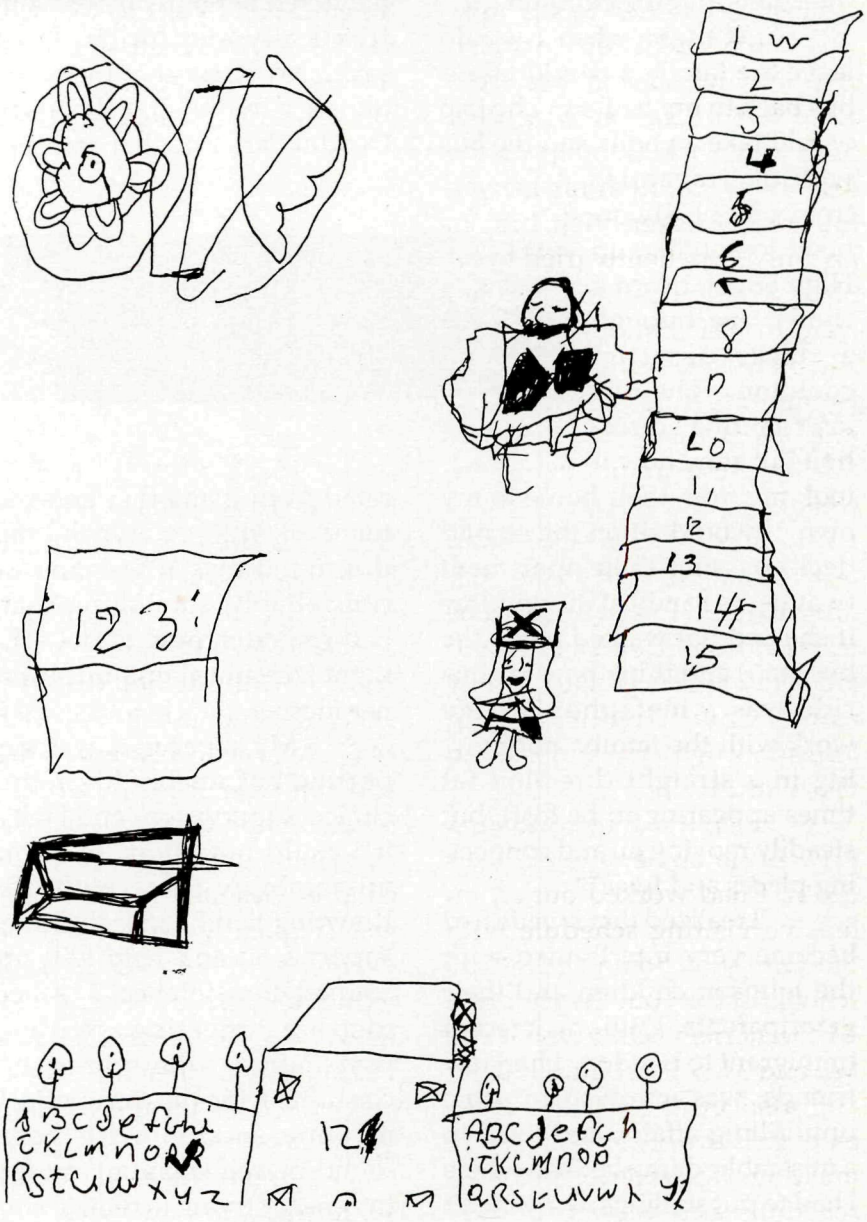
Over time, the children began to use me in different ways and for different needs. Kate and Sandy would use me to share their feelings of loss, grief, and anger and would avidly seek out our individual sessions. Laura came less often and would sit more silently; when she did talk, she would describe more how she was coping than how she was grieving. Sandy developed a crush on me and would walk me to the bus stop at night when I would leave the home visits. In between visits she would write me notes, describing her sadness, how her stomach aches, and her fights with her friends. Once she described being punched in the stomach by a girl and retaliating violently because she said she felt like killing her. In her note she linked this to her memories of her mother's death. She signed it "Sandy — the beautifulest girl in the world — not really (I'm ugly)."

Julie and Peter would draw pictures for me, and we would tell stories to one another. Figures A and B are facsimiles of drawings that I found them doing at home, a week after Violet's death. Both depict the murder. Julie's drawing shows the stairs where it occurred and has pictures of her mother and a monster. Peter's picture is of the actual stabbing.

It is not possible or helpful to say who suffered the greatest loss when Violet died,

but Markie's life changed dramatically. Violet was his main confidante, the person in the family who made the greatest effort to communicate with him. She would talk with him and read with him every day. Not only had he lost her, but he was now living in a chaotic situation, often overlooked, frequently confused, with one grandparent who feared him because he reminded her of her son-in-law and another grandparent who ignored him. The older girls were supportive of him, but they had their own adolescent lives to lead.

The school personnel were very cognizant of Marki's situation and made a special effort to be available to him. In addition, I would take him to professional soccer games on weekends and to karate classes during the week. For obvious reasons, it was important for Markie to feel as if he could defend himself. Although I spent more time with him than with any of the other children, I never felt as if I were reaching him in the same depth.



Two major rituals and events that punctuated our work were Violet's funeral and Mark's trial. Violet's body was badly damaged and the police needed to retain it for evidence for the murder trial. Although a memorial service was held shortly after Violet's death, there was a sense of unreality surrounding it and the children remained detached. Finally, five weeks after her death, Violet's body was released, and the funeral was held. The older girls were able to view the body before she was cremated. At the service, at first there was little visible reaction. Then Laura began to cry uncontrollably. As the grief slowly spread to all of the children, they all let go, wept without restraint, and bid Violet farewell.

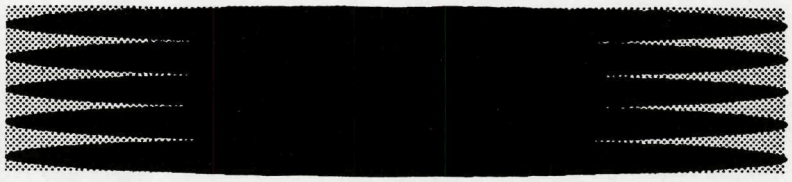
Mark's murder trial was held in January, six months after Violet's death. Kate had to testify. This was traumatic for her, but she also felt as if she were contributing to justice on behalf of her mother. Mark was defiant and leered sexually at a woman, who sat next to me at the trial. However the trial was fairly straightforward, and Mark was found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment. This seemed

to be a source of relief for both the Patels and the children.

At night when I would leave the family, I would take a bus back to my bed-sit. The trip would take an hour and the bus would meander from one neighborhood to another, up High Street, down a church lane, through a dark, deserted common. The bus kept shifting direction but somehow it took me from their home to my own. I would sit on the second deck, passing their apartment (waving to Sandy at the window if she had not walked me to the bus stop) and think how the bus ride was a metaphor for my work with the family: not moving in a straight direction (at times appearing to be lost), but steadily moving on and connecting places and lives.

I realized that my life had become very intertwined with the Johnson children and their grandparents. I still was a recent immigrant to London. I had few friends, was involved in some unfulfilling affairs, and lived in a miserable, damp bed-sit, where I had to put shillings in my meter to get electricity and hot water. I was far away from my family. The Johnson children and the Patels had become my family.

I was also stressed out. I had one record which I listened to over and over again, Marvin Gaye's *"What's Going On"* — "Mercy, Mercy, Me," "Inner City Blues," "What's Going On," "Make Me Wanna Holler," and "Save the Children." I developed insomnia. When I did sleep I would have dreams about endangered pet birds that I would frantically and futilely try to save. My sister sent me a book about a baby gorilla at the Central Park Zoo that was separated from its mother and then reunited with her. When I read it, I found myself weeping uncontrollably, something that I had forgotten how to do. That night I dreamt about Julie losing her mother.



My supervisor was supportive but unable to provide clinical supervision, and I felt as if I could not afford to let my vulnerability show with her. Knowing that I needed clinical supervision and help with my counter-transference, I scheduled a meeting with a psychiatrist, who served as a consultant for the borough. In my one session with her, I found myself spending most of my energy trying to remain composed, as I outlined the situation. She was supportive of what I was doing and expressed concern about how it was affecting me, but I was too proud and well defended to respond to this. I did not see her again.

About a year and a half after I met Violet, I visited Ireland and fell in love with an Irish woman. I decided to move to Ireland. I rationalized to myself that the Johnsons and Patels were through the worst. Laura told me that I was abandoning them. I responded that they were stronger now and needed me less. What I didn't say, that was implicit in my actions, was that I had my own life to lead and that it was taking me away from them. Despite all of my rationalizations, I still felt deeply guilty about leaving them.

SEPARATION AND RE-CONNECTION

Jen remained as the family's social worker for a few months, but then she became pregnant and a new worker was assigned. After another few months, another worker was assigned. Social service reality was sinking in.

The children and I corresponded regularly. Kate and Sandy were particularly reliable letter writers, and both would use their letters as a continuation of our counseling sessions together, sharing profound feelings and current life dilemmas and struggles. Kate visited Mr. Johnson in prison once, on behalf of all of the children. She made it clear to him that none of the children ever wanted to see him again. They never did. Kate, Laura, and Sandy became involved with steady boy friends.

My relationship did not work out. After 18 months, I was desperate to leave Ireland. I debated about whether I should return to the United States after

three years abroad or go back to England. I ultimately decided to return to England, partially, although not exclusively, swayed by my concern for the Johnson children. I knew that I was no longer their social worker, but felt that our relationship was still important, for all of us. A close relative in the United States questioned my professional boundaries. It was a fair question.

I returned to London and started a satisfying job for a family service agency in the same section of South London where I had previously worked. A few months after returning, I met my future wife and stepdaughter and moved in with them.

I remained in regular contact with the Johnsons and Patels but in a new role, as a family friend. Actually, I was more like a member of their extended family like a close uncle or cousin. They would seek my advice about intimate concerns or mundane matters. They would feed me meals. I would have the kids over to my house for supper. They all came to my wedding. My stepdaughter and Julie attended the same summer day camp program that was run by the agency where I worked and where Kate was employed as a counselor.

After three years, my family and I decided to relocate to the United States. This felt less like an abandonment than had my previous departure for Ireland. Everyone in the Patel/Johnson family seemed more settled, although Mr. Patel was not well and Laura (who was in a steady relationship) was pregnant. Still, everyone was moving on with their lives, in school or in jobs and with relationships, as was I. We were all still close, but less dependent on one another.

My wife and I held a going away party with our friends a few nights before we left London. The older children came with their boyfriends. It was an intimate and sad leave-taking. The morning that we were departing, and a couple of hours before leaving for the airport, I received a call from Kate, she had two things to tell me: Mr. Patel had died the day before, and the day before that, Laura had had her baby, a girl.

REFLECTIONS

Writing this story has been both painful and liberating. It is a story that I have carried around with me, for better or worse, for my entire career. For a few years after meeting the Johnsons, I was engaged in clinical work with very disengaged, disadvantaged families, and I threw myself into it. I had not learned to do clinical work in a more detached (professional?), self protective way, and although the intensity of my involvement with the Johnsons was never replicated, I would become very involved with the families with whom I worked. Partially, this was a function of my style, and it was also influenced by the agency that I worked for, which encouraged such intensity. It was no accident that I was working there. But this took its toll and I progressively worked my way into supervisory and administrative roles and eventually went on to do community organizing.

As my own family life developed, I realized that I would not have been able to do what I did with the Johnsons had I not been so alone at the time. Clearly, it meant a great deal for me to work so closely with them. They were a special family, and in our own ways we needed one another. I also think that, in some ways, we helped to heal one another. I hope so. I am painfully aware of the professional boundaries that I crossed in this work and still berate myself for things that I did or did not do.

Mark was in prison for seven years. Rumor has it that he remarried and has another family. Neither Mrs. Patel, the children, nor I regret not knowing for sure.

The three oldest girls are married to loving, gentle men. All three of them have children, six in all. Kate has worked for a multi-national corporation in a managerial capacity for many years. Laura and Sandy are devoted mothers. Julie became pregnant while in school and now has two children. She too has a stable relationship with a man and has been taking college courses in accounting. They all live within a few miles of each other in South London and

remain in close contact.

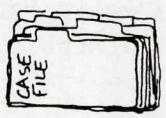
Markie and Peter still live at home with Mrs. Patel. Peter has a steady job and a girl friend and financially supports the family. Markie had been in a job training program for people with special needs, but the program was cut by the Thatcher government, and Markie has not worked or gone to school for years. His sisters are concerned that he uses drugs, but he denies it. Mrs. Patel is still alive. She is virtually blind after two cataract operations and drinks openly and regularly. Despite the difficult times that she has had with the children, she cared for them and she endured. They are devoted to her. She states that Markie is the most loyal of all of her grandchildren and is the one who takes care of her.

My family and I visit England every couple of years, and when we do, we always visit the Johnsons. We all get together in Mrs. Patel's council house, the same one that the children grew up in, and have what my wife has termed "a family reunion." My kids play with their kids. We cook food and reminisce, sharing memories of Violet and of our many experiences together. We joke about how Sandy used to "fancy" me. We take lots of group pictures. By the end, the sheer numbers of all of us in the tiny house become overwhelming, and we say tearful, hugging goodbyes.

We exchange Christmas cards and Kate and Sandy and I correspond, particularly after visits. Kate and her husband have visited us in the States.

I think of them at least every week, often more frequently. My thoughts are often tinged with regret and sadness, of ways that I let them down or didn't do enough. I worry about some of them. Sometimes I cry. I also feel a sense of pride about my work with them, as unorthodox as it was. I admire them. And of course I feel a deep sense of love and affection.

It strikes me as being ironic that I was Violet's social worker for only a few weeks and that I have loved her children, whom I know so much better than her, for over 20 years. And they still fondly think of me as their mom's social worker! And so, our chance meeting, that began as a professional encounter, in the Town Hall many years ago, changed all of our lives. And I am grateful for that.



POST SCRIPT

Since writing "Violet's Seeds," a great deal has happened, both between me and the children portrayed in the narrative, and within my self.

I mentioned the narrative to Sandy and to Kate in letters that I wrote to them, and Kate and I then became hooked up on e-mail. (We now correspond electronically at least once a week.) Kate conferred with two of her sisters, Laura and Sandy, and they asked to see the narrative. I initially felt some anxiety over this. Would it re-traumatize them to read it? Was I taking them on a journey that I was ready for but that they had not planned on? Would they like it? My wife reassured me that there was nothing in it about their mother's death that they did not already know and encouraged me to share it with them. Sonia Abels also urged me to do the same.

So with some trepidation I mailed them each a copy with a cover letter. I warned them of the painful content, explained why I felt the need to write it, predicted that some of my recollections might be faulty, and teased them about their aliases. I also suggested that they get together to discuss their reactions to it, which they agreed to do.

When they received their copies, they told Julie about what I had written, and she read the narrative as well. She was initially hurt that I had not sent her a copy of her own. The women also informed their brothers, who at this point asked not to read it. I am planning to contact them in the near future). We mutually made a decision, via e-mail, not to share it with Mrs. Patel, who might be upset by both the content and some of my comments about her.

I later learned that when Laura received the manuscript, she could not open it and telephoned Sandy. Sandy had been feeling sick with anticipation when the mail had been delivered the same morning and had initially resisted opening her copy. Sandy then read it to Laura over the phone. Kate e-mailed me, stating that they had

all read and discussed it and that although they had many questions(why the title, why the names, why had I gotten certain facts wrong?) it had been a powerful yet positive experience for them. She also informed me that she was having Sandy and Julie and their children over for dinner on Sunday and that she was cooking them chili and banana bread, which is what I used to cook them when I would have them over for dinner.

So I phoned them on Sunday, and we had a very emotional, intimate conversation about the narrative and their reactions to it. I have since received lengthy letters from Sandy (who has also relayed Laura's reactions and Julie. Kate, Sandy and Julie all have described how reading and talking about the tragedy has helped them to feel more connected with one another and that their private grief has moved to a shared bond of mutual loss and support. They had been in touch with their own reactions but had lost contact with what had happened to their siblings. Julie (who) told me that she still has a "winning smile" but is no longer gap-toothed) described it as, "hanging on to our personal loss when it comes to Mum, instead of coming together and recognizing our collective loss." She was reminded of what it was like to have been six at the time, anguishing over her inability to protect Peter, who was free, from the pain, now that she is revisiting those critical years from the perspective of a mother in her late 20's. Sandy shared how she had often wished that she were a boy, so that she could have protected her mother from her father. Kate has been reminded of the meaning of the scars that she carries on both of her hands from that fateful night.

Our letters and conversations have also focused on our relationships with one another. They have been struck by how young I was when I first met them We have all let each other know how important we have been and still are to one another. The metaphor of "being like family" has been frequently invoked.

Sandy has been keeping her own journal, and Julie and Kate have some ideas for narratives of their own. We are corresponding regularly now, and I am encouraging them to write about what happened. I have described for them how I did not know what I was going to write or what I would learn from it until I actually wrote my piece. And I certainly did not know how it would re-invigorate our relationships and perhaps help them to explore their past and their deep attachments to one another together. Julie told me what happened has always been a secret that she could not share with others, but that she now feels less inhibition about talking about it, it wasn't her fault; it was and is an important transformative part of her life, and some good things have even accrued from the tragedy. I appreciate her wisdom. □