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“  
*In the long run,  
it is not a missed  
clue but a missed  
life—a series of  
missed lives.  
Anyone even  
slightly implicated  
in the  
interpretation  
process finds  
oneself caught up  
in the sadness and  
guilt . . .*”

## **MIND SHADOWS**

A Suicide in the Family

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*Research on youth suicide is reviewed along with a brief recounting of family systems theory and the concepts underlying life study research. Together, these three orientations serve as a foundation for an account of a suicide of a teenage girl. The story of the young woman reveals the role of narrative thought in autoethnography as well as the nature of storytelling and the witnessing of personal accounts by the researcher. The actual account describes the life of a young woman growing up in a volatile home where there is constant fighting and tension. Her reaction to the anger surrounding her and the disapproval she feels culminates in an act of self-destruction. The account concludes with a discussion of the role of family systems, shame, and destructive relationships in the development of the self.*

## ADOLESCENT SUICIDE

Following accidents and homicides, suicide ranks as the third leading cause of death for people fifteen to twenty four years of age, the actual rate being 11.3 deaths per 100,000 people (Berger and Thompson 1995). During the past two decades, suicide rates in this age group have more than doubled; this finding occurs as well for children ages five to fourteen, where suicide rates tripled from 1980 to 1995.

It is estimated that almost 10 percent of the American adolescent population has attempted suicide, with white adolescents attempting far more often than African American adolescents (Garland and Zigler 1993; Crosson-Tower 1998). Generally, suicidal ideation is noted in girls more often than boys; hence, it is not surprising to discover that girls attempt suicide almost four times more frequently than do boys, although boys, because they employ more lethal methods, complete suicide about four times as often as girls (Garland and Zigler 1993). Girls contemplating suicide are not unique in expressing intense hopelessness along with their depression, even though many of them give the impression that they are able to handle loneliness and lowered self-esteem (Bellah 1999; Shneidman 1978). Finally, about one-third of all adolescent inpatients have been hospitalized because of suicide attempts. Predictably, suicide rates increase among mental patients hospitalized for various psychiatric disorders.

Among those young people attempting and completing suicide, one discovers a familiar array of psychological traits and symptoms (Garland and Zigler 1993), such as relatively high rates of substance abuse,

the presence of narcissistic traits, impulsive dramatic traits or low levels of impulse control, and most especially, mood disorders, particularly depression. Approximately 40 percent of adolescent suicide cases involve major depressions.

Significantly, adolescent suicide also involves factors related to family dynamics—many of them, actually, considered to be so-called predictors of adolescent suicide (Blumenthal and Kupfer 1988; Rubenstein et al. 1989). They include interpersonal loss or conflict (approximately 70 percent of adolescent suicides occur within one month following intense conflict with or separation from significant people), lack of family supports or cohesion (Curran 1987; Patterson, DeBaryshe, and Ramsey 1989), parental strictness (Dusek 1996), parent-child discord (Baumeister 1990), family histories of mood disorders, parental psychopathology (60 percent of adolescent suicide cases reveal parents with emotional disorders), families revealing intense competition in areas of academics and careers (Harter 1990), and violence of any sort within the family. It is known that adolescents having been physically abused are four times more likely to commit suicide than adolescents not having this history. What is not yet known is whether merely witnessing abuse increases suicidal ideation. In sum, adolescent suicides often occur in families experiencing stress on an almost daily basis (Hauser and Bowlds 1990).

## **FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY**

Serving as a background for the present study of an adolescent suicide, the literature on family systems theory advances several relevant principles (Minuchin 1974; Haley 1971; Satir 1983; Bowen 1985; Napier and Whitaker 1978; Guerin 1976). First and foremost, irrespective of its individual constituents, the family constitutes a system, which, in effect, means that what happens to one person ramifies in the lives of all other family members and that the system itself executes functions and contains properties and characteristics representing more than the sum of the individual functions, properties, and characteristics of family members (Haley 1980).

Second, as Minuchin (1974) postulates, the nature of boundaries between and among family members contributes not only to the definition of the system and quality of interactions between members but to

the individual representations of self and family held by members. More explicitly, in cases of relationships where boundaries appear to be unclear and impermeable—where it is difficult, in other words, to discern where the emotional life of one person ends and another begins in what Minuchin has called “enmeshment”—individuals experience a sort of chaotic feeling, which they often attribute to personal or psychological distress rather than to the form of family system in which they are operating. Improper boundaries also lead to what is called the “parentified child,” which occurs when the child is obliged to assume inappropriate responsibility in families unable to successfully manage authority issues (Minuchin and Fishman 1981).

Third, families may be assessed in terms of health and pathology in part by dint of the way they are able to handle the problems, however severe, of individual members (Minuchin 1974; Daniels-Mohring 1993). So-called pathological families often designate a particular person as the family problem or family patient, thereby avoiding a host of potential problems existing in the relationships of other family members. The labeled patient, in other words, assumes the heat and attention of the family. Labeling a child as patient derives from what Minuchin (1974) called “family coalitions,” a term meant to suggest inflexible alignments of family subsystems, such as, for example, cases of children playing too significant a role in the so-called parental subsystem. It is not uncommon in families where coalitions emerge to observe parents teaching their children to act publicly as if the family were free of any problems, if not altogether perfect, to lessen the tensions witnessed in other family members as well as in their relationships. In contrast, the so-called healthy family, the one presumably exhibiting appropriate boundaries and an absence of coalitions, appears better able to assimilate individual struggles and development into the ongoing workings of the greater system.

Finally, a fundamental axiom of family systems theory states that healthy family members are able to deal on intellectual and emotional levels with each of the other members of the family (Silberberg and Steinberg 1987). This notion assumes that individuals recognize what others in the family are able and not able to provide and, hence, what they themselves are able to provide members of the family. A healthy family is not only a good place to be—it is a place where every individual is allowed his or her own emptiness (Bowen 1985). Presumably, the opposite holds true for the unhealthy family.

Conversely, family systems theory proffers that psychiatric symptomatology typically develops from families unsuccessfully attempting to handle problems of everyday life (Jackson 1957). In altering the system, presumably for the purpose of dealing with an individual family member, all members of the family run the risk of experiencing excessive tension or disturbance (Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch 1974).

### LIFE STUDY RESEARCH

The study to be presented derives from life study research, which essentially is nothing more and nothing less than the collection of people's accounts of their own experiences (Cottle 1977, forthcoming; Lightfoot and Davis 1997; Stake 1995). Research of this type is described by Woods (1986) as working "from within the group, and from within the perspectives of the group's members. It is their meanings and their interpretations that count" (p. 4). Life study research "allows the researcher to live with the characters of the story, then recreate the scenes and bring them to life by telling the story" (Roy, 1998, 45).

In listening to these accounts, we employ a mode of thought Bruner (1986) called narrative thinking. In this mode, we strive to render meaning to experience, be it ours or someone else's. In this mode, we become implicated in the thinking, feeling, and knowing of experience and essentially grow to appreciate the nature of the conscious world of the person to whom we are attending. In the expression of everyday language, we begin to understand how the storyteller gives meaning to his or her experience. The narrative enables people "to construe what they are and where they are headed" (Polkinghorne, 1988, 14).

Life studies conform to the criteria of qualitative research outlined by Eisner (1991). First, the work is field centered; we explore the individual life in the contexts and environment of the person him- or herself. Second, "the self is used as an instrument" to explore itself (Beane 1999, 32). Third, using expressive language, life studies bring into the text the actual voices of the persons under study. Fourth, individual stories serve as examples of a particular phenomenon and not because these stories merely describe something. Finally, qualitative research draws its credibility through the coherence (of the various components) of the story (Waller 1970), that is, the insight brought to the story by the

storyteller and because of the way the person explores him- or herself through the story (Stake 1995).

In life study research, we enter the home or community of a particular family, make our observations, and record what we see and hear (Henry 1971) as well as examine relevant written documents such as letters and diaries. Again and again, we go back (“to the field”), and in this returning, we develop friendships. If nothing more, families trust in the fact that researchers will return and honestly record what they have witnessed.

One of the best descriptions of the sort of caring connection or mutuality emerging in storytellers and their witnesses is found in the work on female development of Miller and Stiver (1997), as follows:

We believe that our focus on connection and disconnection speaks to the core of the human condition, the foundation that has remained obscure and out of focus. While all theories have spoken about relationships, this core has remained obscure because these theories emerged from an underlying preoccupation—though one not usually made explicit—with individual gratification and power. . . . Once we examine more accurately the lives of all people—women and men—we find ourselves moving away from this preoccupation and toward a recognition of the necessity of human connection and the sources and consequences of disconnection’s. (P. 195)

From the outset, families learn that if anything is written about them, they must grant permission for publication of all materials. In the account that follows, however, an exception had to be made to this unwritten contract that no one could have foreseen. Clearly the act of writing is not merely one of recounting events and conversations. It is essentially an act of selecting materials to be presented, and thus, in the selection lies a portion of the interpretation of the materials (Cottle forthcoming).

The life study emerges not only as a method of human inquiry but as a process wherein the storyteller reveals his or her inner world and ultimately, in the most self-reflective of actions (Kemmis 1985), his or her judgments about one’s self. It offers, in other words, the opportunity of a sort of mutual investigation, with storyteller and witness working together to seek the essence of a human being as it is revealed in the story. Unquestionably, the nature and evolution of the relationship between storyteller and listener affects the materials generated.

Together they serve as architects of the final document, which means that together they construct the worlds, private and public, described in the final document (Becker 1958; Kegan 1982).

In the end, the story is all that we are or, perhaps, all that we leave behind as memory (Maguire 1998). It is, moreover, memory doused with emotion and perhaps that ephemeral sense of humanness that is only initiated by pain.

## THE STUDY

The data for the present work were collected during a period of several years as part of a larger study of teachers that students in various schools designated as being significant in their lives. Upon getting to know these teachers, a second list was drawn up of the students these teachers felt were significant in their own lives. Permission was then obtained to speak not only with the students but their families as well.

The data were derived from a series of visits within the homes with family members together as well as from visits with individual family members that might take place anywhere, focusing on the young people in question. Over time, in work of this type where researchers become implicated in the lives of families (Minuchin 1974), various family members become friends. Conversations therefore frequently contain the sort of personal information one normally reserves for one's intimates or even psychotherapists. Importantly, the family in this one life study perceived the researcher as just that, someone interested in their child and their family, someone attempting to describe the daughter's and the family's circumstances. The meetings with the family were not intended as therapy sessions.

Clearly the relationship of researcher to family members and particularly the quality of trust established affects the stories that are told and the events recounted (Kotre 1995). Presumably, the closer the friendship, the more detailed and richer the story. In addition to direct observation and group and individual conversations, other materials such as letters, personal notes, and diaries were examined for relevant information.

A significant turning point in the following account occurred when the researcher witnessed scenes of family members fighting. Witnessing events normally kept secret by families further implicates the



researcher in the family's ongoing interactions and history. In this case, the researcher's presence during family conflicts allowed some family members to speak openly of personal matters, while other family members chose not to speak of these matters at all.

In life study research, family members may employ researchers as sounding boards if not unconsciously as quasi-psychotherapists. Quite possibly, the researcher becomes one of the only people to whom the family members can speak about certain issues. It should be pointed out that on more than one occasion, the family in question refused referral to family and individual counselors.

In the account, any reference to a person's insight into his or her own thinking comes directly from him or her. Either the individual has volunteered an insight or interpretation or attempted one in response to a researcher's request. Interpretations authored by the researcher are clearly indicated. The interpretation of an experience is as significant in life study research as the original description of the experience in question. In all cases, an attempt has been made to accurately describe events as they occurred and reproduce language as close to the original as possible.

Each of us is constantly attempting to make sense of the effect on us of external events and internal sensations, as well as the effect we have on the external world (Kegan 1982). Whether we are asking people to tell us how they feel about or perceive some experience, we are collecting information through their spoken accounts or stories. All of our participants' recollections of the past, perceptions of the here and now, and expectations of how the future might look are contained in their stories. Significantly, in their accounts we discern their interpretations of these distinct experiences. The interpretation, in other words, is part and parcel of the telling (Earle 1972). "Narratives exhibit an explanation instead of demonstrating it" (Polkinghorne 1988, 15).

In many respects, an examination of the account that follows tests the limits of life study research. The child and the family, or more precisely, the psychological state of the child and the social structure of the family are revealed in the descriptions and accounts. There is also the matter of the researcher's role. In many respects, the complexity of this account is captured by Frank (1998): "The most value laden areas to study are mental states and social institutions; to study them together forces the researcher into the abyss of the subjective world" (p. 419). It is precisely

this subjective world that the life study or autoethnographic research generally seeks to approach.

## THE ACCOUNT

At the time, no one had a good explanation for the way Annie Mansard reacted to the departure of her best friend. Sarah Halkins moved away from Bristol Town when her father's business transferred him to Houston. This sort of thing happened frequently in Bristol Town, an affluent suburban community where families found handsome homes near enough to Boston only to learn six months or two years later that their insurance, brokerage, or data processing firm had decided they would be more valuable to the company in another city.

So Sarah moved, and Annie felt sad. She was only eleven at the time, but in her parents' eyes, the sadness never lifted. An aunt of hers, Maggie Carlisle, said it was like something had been lifted out of the child and one had the distinct feeling that nothing would ever again fill that emptiness. Maggie's husband, Arthur, never forgot his niece's peculiar and somewhat exaggerated reaction to little Sarah's departure—not that Annie ever talked about it with him. Arthur said, "You get used to hearing a piece of machinery, which, let's say, has several engines working in it. Then suddenly, for no good reason, one of the engines shuts down. You say, 'What was that?' Something's different now. Damn thing doesn't make as much noise as it used to." He added one last thought: "When it comes to kids, you hate all the noise. But you worry yourself to death with them when it gets too quiet."

One girl left, the other stayed, and it was said the latter was never the same. "Utter foolishness," Annie's father would remark when the subject came up. He continued,

Annie grew sad, depressed. Why make so much of it? Why make anything of it? You have two kinds of children in the world. You have the ones who love all kinds of kids. They go to school, they go into a new neighborhood, and all of a sudden, there they are with ten thousand new friends. Bees to flowers, and they're the flowers. The other sort of child prefers one or two friends. They trust these friends, lean on them. Annie's a leaner, a truster in one or two friends. At the time little Sarah went away, the children were close. Each was the other's only friend.

You don't make a case about that. Believe me, you look for all sorts of clues. There is no evidence for anything! If a child has a million friends and one goes away, they barely know the child has gone. If a child has one friend and she goes away, then of course it's like the world has caved in on you. I'm just as happy making the case that the troubled child is the one who needs a lot of friends to protect himself from the one going away. Why not? Why not make the case that way too?

Annie's older brother Timothy said he didn't remember Annie going through any changes when Sarah Halkins left Bristol Town. He did not think Annie was a person "who leaned"—he recognized this word to be his father's—"all that heavily on one friend. You don't have a friend with Dad," Tim would say, his lips looking as though they dared not break into a smile—or was it perhaps pain he wished to express? "You lean on people. You get the image? The old house-of-cards routine? One card falls, they all fall. And if it's nothing more than a two-card house, then you've got yourself a little problem, don't you?"

Two years younger than his brother, Jonathan Mansard remembered Sarah Halkins well. "She had a dumb, cute face, you know the kind? She sort of looked at you, and it was kind of nice, but you couldn't remember what she looked like five minutes after she walked out of the kitchen, and you could have been staring at her the whole time. But she was cute. And those two, her and Annie were very close. She was always in the house. Or Annie was at her house. She was here as much as anybody else in this family. I'll go you one farther." Jonathan had an intriguing way of pulling a listener into his stories. He appeared as if he were reading words he barely could discern off his shoe tops. It was as if he were urging you to crouch down and peer at the words with him. If Timothy pushed people away, Jonathan drew them to him.

"If Annie had her way, she probably would have gone to Texas with the Halkins. Maybe she loved them, I don't know. She loved Sarah, I'm sure. But she wouldn't have had to love the parents. She would have gone anyway. I'm sort of sure of that."

Responding to a request to recapture the old days, Melinda Rafters, the oldest sister of Annie's mother, had more thoughts about her sister than her niece. One felt her anger when she described the nature of her sister's ways as a mother.

There she was, Dr. Freud, offering the reason for some matter or other. A child make a mistake? You didn't accidentally make a mistake from the

time you were six months old. God gave you and my sister six months of grace, but after that, it was Dr. Freud all the way. If a three-month-old baby fell out of her crib, it was accidental. Things like that could happen. But a six-month-old baby falls out of her crib, and we're into the realm of the deeply psychological.

What a pathetic thing when psychology takes over for religion. Both are necessary, I'm sure, otherwise neither one of them would have become such thriving businesses. But they substitute for one another about as easily as, what shall we say, a man standing in for a woman. Children make mistakes. They serve up more faults than all the tennis players in the world, if you'll pardon a horrible pun. But you know, puns say something too; they express some of my anger. Jeanne analyzes and analyzes. It's not that she should have left that job to the people who can do it or at least get paid for doing it. She should have let her children grow up without all the psychological razzmatazz.

You want analysis? Here's one. The kid that falls out of the crib? It's the will of the mother or the father. You want to try that one on for size, Jeannie dearest? Whose unconscious are we talking about? You can break a kid with too much psychology. I'm convinced of that. You beat kids into a pulp with that stuff. The name of the game is to open the flower; you don't have to worry about it dying and going under. The world will take care of that for you. It's cruel out there in the garden. But the parents' job is to bring up that flower. It's supposed to be a perennial, says so on the package, each year to flower again and again. But from my standpoint, the job is done, forever, completed after you've done it the first time. Once around for each child. No puns this time.

Melinda Rafter's always indicated she had come to the end of one of her longer outbursts by peering about at an imaginary audience and holding out her hands, palms up, to them. The gesture made one believe she would have accepted a bouquet if one were offered.

"But look at me," she was concluding. "I'm analyzing exactly like my older sister would have me do. Although one best not indulge in this in front of the master. Didn't Freud say that sometimes a cigar can just be a cigar? Besides, murder comes in many packages, but I shall say no more."

Annie Mansard grew up listening to classical music. Her father and mother practically crawled out of bed reaching for a radio or stereo set. Every few minutes, it seemed, someone was building shelves to house the growing record collection. She tolerated most of the music, loved some of it, but never felt the courage or desire to tell her parents that she

liked a piece of a symphony or sonata. She found the romantic composers to be the most pleasant and the modern forms utterly disgusting—not that she loved every piece of popular music.

Various pieces of music were emblazoned on what she called the entrance porch to her mind. Music lined the walls. It was constant background noise in the house, although her parents hardly would have condoned the word noise to describe passages from Brahms, Lalo, Honneger, or Bartok. Occasionally, Annie offered a rejoinder: it was noise, masking, hiding-the-world-behind-it kind of noise. If one could pretend anything when the music was loud enough, then one could pretend that things simply were not real. You could conceal the fighting between Timothy, Jonathan, and your father with a big hunk of a Beethoven symphony.

Sitting atop his younger brother, Timothy had him pinned down on the kitchen floor. He drove his knees hard into Jonathan's upper arms and then pounded him on the chest and stomach with his fists. Timothy was yelling, crying, and swearing. Periodically, he would blow out his breath, exhausted from the fight and clearly in some pain. Annie watched from her accustomed station in the doorway, half amused, half terrified. She would tell in these moments how she thought about being a boy and having the freedom to pound her fists into someone and be pounded by them. Invariably, she rooted for Jonathan, although never outwardly. She described being younger and watching the boys fight. She would climb on top of Timothy, which made it impossible for the boys to carry on their battle. So they would cease, and her parents would embrace her, calling her the family's pacifier. She would recall these moments of praise as being support not so much for her as a person but for what she was able to do for the family that her parents could not.

At some point, however, she decided never again to referee but instead let the boys fight while she would put music on loudly, which succeeded in bringing her mother's fury to a fever pitch. Jeanne Mansard knew the music was meant to taunt her. If she were truly a good mother, she always questioned, then why did the boys fight incessantly? Why did her husband join the fights? And why was the only person capable of stopping the violence a young girl?

Hearing her mother screaming at the boys, Annie described rushing into the living room. She heard her mother calling the boys horrible names. They were "ugly," "ferocious," "bestial," "idiots," "morons," "bastards." One minute she was screaming to her husband to stop them;

the next minute she was urging them all to kill each other. If it meant that at last the house would know peace, then let them go all out. By now, Annie was picking out a record: Wagner, Beethoven, Shostokovich. Everything seemed frenzied and bizarre. Everyone in the family was crying and screaming, while the music exploded from the living room speakers like a giant airplane revving its engine. Then Annie would rush back to the kitchen and witness the effects of her action. Holding her hands first over her mouth, then her ears, and jumping up and down, she watched her mother screaming at her to shut the music off.

It seemed as though Mrs. Mansard never stopped shouting during these horrendous sporting events: "All right, kill each other, but do it already! Annie, stop that damnable music! I don't understand you. I simply do not understand what's wrong with you. And them and all of us! Kill the house, burn it for all I care! I don't want anything to do with any of you anymore! Just once, I beg of you sick and rotten animals to stop it! All right, all right, that's it. I'm calling the police. That's it." And on one occasion she did reach for the phone and dial some numbers. Then she looked at her daughter and tried not to listen to the sounds of her husband and sons as they threw themselves over the hard stone floor, swearing, desperately trying to free their arms and legs. By now, the boys were drenched with perspiration, and Timothy was bleeding from the nose and mouth. Everyone was crying.

Annie reported that at times, Bill Mansard would hit one of his sons, since now he had lost interest in separating them and bringing peace. It appeared to her that in these moments, he wanted to destroy them. The boys would groan with pain, and Annie would see this sick and dazed look come over their faces and watch their bodies grow weak. They could not afford to lose consciousness. All the while, the boys were shrieking at the top of their lungs, "You animal bastard! You sick animal bastard!" And Annie would sense the music growing louder, which only fueled the fury.

In the doorway, Annie could be seen grimacing one moment, screaming the next. She would describe feeling a "sickly, empty sort of pain" inside, as if she were not there at all. Battle raging on the floor in front of her, she watched her mother dial the phone, waiting for it to be slammed down. Annie knew there was no way her mother would have policemen arrive at her home on a Saturday morning to quell a family fight as if this were some inner-city housing project. Her mother never followed through with her threats to call anyone. So Annie would grin

derisively at her mother's helplessness, which only infuriated Jeanne, who now would run past Annie and turn off the music. This one sound, at least, she could control.

It was an emptiness that Annie always felt, as strange as this seemed even to her. As much as she was overcome with the fury and excitement, she was particularly affected by her mother, normally so controlled and rational, being reduced to a fitful, raging, helpless child. Also strange was that there was a mysterious sexual side to these scenes—not that she would dare tell anyone about these sensations. These belonged only in her diary. But then, in reaction perhaps to all that happened in that “wrong house,” as she would come to recount it, she would “go dead inside.” Empty, hollow—what words could she find to describe this state of “feelinglessness”? Fright was part of it, but this too would disappear as quickly as she tried to put a word to it. Dislike was another part. “All alone,” she could be heard to say, standing in the doorway trying to determine who in the world she liked and why it was that she could completely tune out the very music that transformed her mother into a raging, broken human being. “All alone.”

Much of this she shared with Sarah, with whom she kept contact over the years: everything about the music and watching her father fight and her mother storm off in that slumping way of hers when it was evident she considered herself the ultimate loser in the kitchen battles. When the boys fought in their bedrooms, the family took it as a sign that they were not to be separated. Whatever was destroyed would remain that way as long as the fight was restricted to private turf. Annie grew to believe that the kitchen fights were staged to provoke her mother. Perhaps her mother even instigated the “royal battles,” as the family had come to call them. Annie called them “the battle of the kings for the queen.” These words, too, lived behind the smiles she would show her mother as she propped herself against the wall in the narrow passage-way leading from the kitchen.

Yet with all this, she reported, there were still no feelings she could hold on to long enough to be able to define or control. Why, exactly, did she wish to dissect her emotions? Because that was what her mother did? Might she have been content merely to have a feeling last long enough to allow her to define it before it leapt back into the shadows as if playing some trick on her? There was no mistaking those special feelings, the ones evoked by the fighting and the predictable final scene of her mother's spirit slowly breaking and her body folding forward as she

trudged, the actress in anguish, across the kitchen floor toward the dining room. She wrote often of this in her diary.

Each of these visions had a life of its own. They did leap about in her mind like shadows. They did tease and taunt her and, often too, hurt her. This was true, just as it was true that no matter what feelings might have arisen, no matter how they appeared to dance about in the visual field into which she could at will transform her mind, which she did in speaking as well as writing, the final result was always the same: her mind seemed to grow larger, then emptier, eventually causing her to feel even more alone. It was worse at night in bed, she admitted, in the darkness and in the silence.

One thing could be said about the tempestuous kitchen floor fights: they brought forth noise that came to be associated with living. Annie's aloneness was aroused by the fights, but at least all five Mansards, as intelligent or as primitive as they were, as human or bestial—her mother's word—were all there. Alone and together. Then, as always, her emotions produced even more mind shadows, which quickly disappeared behind the obstructions her own mind created to contain and conceal them. At least this is how she described these emotions.

Sarah Halkins knew all about this. Whatever details she did not know before, Annie made certain to tell her during the last days they spent together and then again in letters and phone calls. Sarah listened to all of it. Annie remembered that Sarah never smiled; even when she did, Sarah never laughed. Sarah always felt the seriousness of the accounts and especially the manner in which they were told. But she did cry when Annie cried, which was often. They cried too often, Sarah Halkins would recall years later, although being only eleven, she never fully understood how dangerous the situation at the Mansard's house had become. How could she know when Annie herself struggled to describe the scenes and the feelings associated with them? How could she possibly foresee the consequences of the stories she was hearing on the eve of her own rather scary voyage to a new home hundreds of miles away?

Still, Sarah never forgot those last conversations with her best friend. Annie's words and moods were far too strong ever to forget, even though Annie herself had seemed strangely weak or at least resigned somehow. Sarah remembered a veil of sadness. Even at nine and ten, Annie had just seemed sad. Sarah's going away only made matters worse—not that anyone could ever blame her for whatever might happen in the future.



“Oh, dear God,” Jeanne Mansard would wail one evening as snow fell outside and looked heavy enough to bring down even the strongest roof under its weight. She continued,

Where was the beginning of this horrible, horrible story? Where did it start, start, start? How could it have been going on without us seeing it? We did, you know. We did. Oh, Christ, yes, we did. And we went blind like soldiers terrified by war. Damn the war! Damn all of them! We went blind. Oh, Jesus, yes, I have been blind from the beginning, and it was my job not to be. That’s the excruciating pain: it was my job not ever, ever, ever to be blind. I killed her. He killed her. Her brothers killed her. This house killed her. The music killed her. We were blind, and the whole rotten world was blind too.

We weren’t the only ones. They were blind in the schools. Where were they all those years? And her friends, and their parents? All blind, all blind. If you knew her and you didn’t see anything, or you didn’t say anything, which is so much more terrible, then you were blind. That’s the whole story. Oh, Jesus, Jesus Christ. And there is no comforting or communing with anyone about it now. There’s nothing now because that kid is gone. Damnable, damnable. It’s all such a waste. All my life I heard about it, but darken our door? Oh, no! Not here. Not here where the rich live. Not here where I live, in the home I created. Jesus, what a waste. What a colossal crime against all of us. I mean it. I want to blame and blame more and more people. All of them. I want to drag innocent people into this house from I don’t care where. I don’t even want to know them, and I want to blame the hell out of them and the hell out of me. Jesus, Jesus, it is so wretchedly miserable. You want so much back. You want to take so much of your life back and kill it. I swear to God: I want to kill so much of my life, the future too. If I could see it, I’d probably want to kill it too. I have no words for this. I’m broken apart. Jesus God, I am broken. This whole house and family, this whole world is broken. Broken and unfixable. Just broken.

There is a story to be told of a happy day. Annie remembered it well. She had gone shopping at the sprawling complex of stores two towns west of her home. She, Gloria Brenning, Cynthia Ducksworth; there were others, but it is difficult to remember all the details of what one did at age twelve when almost four years have passed. The trip, Annie recalled, required the girls to go on a bus, which was always an adventure and not so much because one saw people—well, stared at people and usually laughed at them, although one hates to admit this. Trips on the bus or trolley rides into Boston were always more exciting than car

trips with her family because she felt she was “getting out,” being in the open world, and doing what others did or were supposed to be doing. It was action and activity, movement, the glory of movement.

Annie thought often of traveling when she got older. Perhaps she would spend five to ten years of doing nothing but going around the world. She imagined traveling by boat and train, learning several languages and working her way through peasant villages and industrial cities where not one person could understand her. But she would make out relying on her intelligence and ingenuity. If she needed money—although she imagined she could devise a lifestyle requiring no money—she would find a way. She certainly would never write home requesting funds from her parents. The whole point was to survive on one’s own, free of anyone’s assistance and influence.

She knew, however, she would never undertake such a voyage. Ultimately, she imagined, it would prove to be too much of an ordeal. It would only exhaust her. One grows exhausted traveling and probably bored as well. It is not that the different countries start looking alike. Rather, the experience of picking up and starting out all over again in a new city or village becomes repetitive; once again, one must struggle with the problem of finding places to stay and figuring out how to earn even small amounts of money. Then there’s that painful process of meeting new people, over and over again the new people. Making friends is difficult enough when one does not speak their language, although sometimes she felt it was easier to meet friends when one does not speak their language. Sometimes words just get in the way. But no, that was not it. The problem was leaving people after establishing a friendship with them.

On second thought, it would not be a defeat to ask one’s parents to send money. The whole point of traveling was to make new friends. Earning money in foreign countries was more a test of one’s ingenuity and courage. But after passing the test once or twice, why keep doing it? At that point, it is better to work on friendships and have Mommy and Daddy pay the way. Leaving new friends would be difficult. It would be better to become a hotel manager and have people visit you. This way you know at the time of their arrival the time of their departure. So you could hardly blame yourself for their leaving. In the end, it was better perhaps not to travel but to learn of other countries through books and movies. No need to pester Mommy and Daddy for money. In all of Annie’s ruminations about world travel, the word *lonely* never came up.

The bus ride to the shopping mall took thirty minutes, the girls giggling all the way. Annie was one of the crowd. Her descriptions of the experience revealed her enjoyment of being with them, being lost among them. As she listened to their animated conversations, she wondered whether they had been having experiences about which she had no understanding. It was a peculiar concern related, she said, to the feeling that all kids have knowing that a friend has something you wish you had or did something you wish you had done. But there was more. Her concern was not to miss out on the understanding or appreciation of a single human experience. No emotion, mood, or fantasy must ever convince her that she might be missing out on something. If the others had something that was kept from her, it meant that she was herself lacking. It meant too that something was wrong with her mind.

The girls never stopped talking. More noise, Annie noticed, came from their little nest on the bus than from all the other people combined. She watched the girls watching themselves, just as she watched herself watch herself. It was an exhausting exercise. Why did she think so much about these matters and write of them so often in her diary? Why did she watch anyone or anything so closely? Why all this vigilance? Why did her mind have to work so hard all the time? Why, at age twelve, wasn't she able to ride a bus to a mall, shop, browse, eat, talk endlessly as the others did and for once not go through these tedious and fatiguing acts of self-reflection? Why couldn't the motors of her mind just once shut off or, as she would say, just break down completely?

But there was the one psychological experience others must have known she lacked: the capacity to go for hours, months, whole lifetimes without having a single psychological experience at all, to be totally unaware of one's mind. The others, she believed, had quiet inside them, comforting, enduring quiet. Comforting quiet like lying in your mother's arms. Lying there, the two of you, breathing together, no one speaking. Feeling your mother's chest expand, then contract, and the fabric of her blouse on your skin. Feeling the muscles in her shoulders and arms as well as the fleshy parts. And her hands, not quite as smooth as years before.

What would be nice in such moments would be to put your face against your mother's breast and fall asleep. For these moments, surely, it is permissible to envy a baby or even wish to be one. Merely observing a mother and her baby reveals how much the mother enjoys holding

the baby and has no desire to place her back in the crib. It is always quiet when a mother holds her baby. Everything else seems so far away.

The girls must have peered into a million store windows that one afternoon, although the jewelry stores were always the most tantalizing: tiny rings and bracelets and the earrings, always the earrings provoking the same conversations about finally getting one's ears pierced. The girls were standing in front of Hemion's Jewelry Store, its earring collection hanging in the window on fine wires like stars, when Annie abruptly made her decision. Inside the store, she found a tall blond woman who pierced ears. Best of all, if you had your ears pierced, you received a set of earrings as a gift. Some of the girls acted disgusted by the piercing, but Annie could sense their excitement. Some were already examining the display cases hunting for the appropriate gift. Cynthia chose a simple gold ring design. They were perfect.

The woman first used a liquid to clean the lobes and then took a small gadget that looked to be not unlike a paper hole punch to perform the minor operation. The girls crowded around Annie, who grimaced as though experiencing intense pain. There was a stinging sensation, but it was less frightening than she had imagined. The new earrings were at once inserted, although a doctor had once advised Annie if she ever had the procedure done, it would be best to have a small string placed in the holes while the puncture healed.

The discussion with the doctor, Jeanne Mansard said later, was merely an exercise of the tongue. Annie knew her mother would never allow her to have her ears pierced. If it was to be done, she would have to make the decision on her own, and it would have to be spontaneous. That one afternoon, she had looked at the earrings floating across the face of the window on the silver wire and announced that she was going to have her ears pierced. The girls loved her for doing it; she was going to make this the best shopping day of their lives. One thing was certain, Annie thought as the tall woman finished locking the earrings in place: this was no exercise of the tongue.

The woman had not spoken a word during the entire procedure. The girls, however, never stopped talking. Annie loved that they were so acknowledging of her courage. Finally, when they were outside in the colorful aisles of the mall, the girls admired how she looked. For an instant, the psychological nonsense, as she called it, was put aside. She loved what she saw reflected in every store window of the mall. She did

look beautiful, with her thin straight nose and light brown hair with reddish glow barely falling over the new earrings. The girls had grown silent in admiration. All they could do was stare at her, their silence a tribute to her beauty.

Annie stood stock still, turning her head dramatically from side to side and holding back her hair in such a manner that a great wave of it would flow back almost over the ear but not so much that the earring was concealed. Each time she modeled her earrings for them, she imagined the whole world growing perfectly still. It was the loveliest of all days. There was no future to be concerned about, no past to upset her. Her friends did find her beautiful, and they loved her. No one could call this day an exercise of the tongue.

Two hours later when she returned home, she was slapped across the face by her mother. Sentenced to her room, she was told she would not receive an allowance for one month and was denied the privilege of going anywhere for that month except to school or piano lessons. She was not to speak to any friends on the telephone unless the conversations involved schoolwork. All calls would be monitored. And she was never to wear the earrings again.

As she went to her room, tears cascading down her cheeks, she heard her mother telephoning the family physician and asking his nurse if the holes in recently pierced ears would automatically seal shut if earrings were never inserted. She was advised that infection was less likely to occur if something, even a small string, were placed in the lobes. But Mrs. Mansard did not abide by the nurse's instructions. Nor did she ever receive the little bracelet with the tiny bauble hanging from it that Annie had purchased for her. The bauble revealed a mother holding her baby's head on her shoulder. The gift was buried that same evening in one of the garbage cans alongside the garage, still wrapped in its yellow and white striped box. That night in bed, when she reflected on the events of the day, Annie comforted herself with the thought that at least she had not wasted money on a card.

Annie's reflections on the trip to the shopping mall revealed the way she experienced thinking: so much commotion inside her mind, noisy, crushing-sounding motors that seemed to me to be her wishes and their built-in inhibitions. One moment she imagined traveling; the next moment, she had resigned herself to staying home or near enough that she could safeguard her parents' support. It was one of many puzzles that seemed to have no reasonable solution: how could it be that one

moment she lived with such intense hatred for them and the next moment feel as if she required them merely to stay alive? She looked to the other girls for clues on managing this vacillation in feelings. She yearned to hurt her parents, but even as these thoughts crossed her mind, they boomeranged, flying out into imaginary space and returning in the form of self-punishment. What she hoped to resolve in listening to the other girls—she never expressed an interest in hearing how boys managed these delicate affairs of the mind—was the balance not so much between hating and loving her parents but between wanting to hurt them and needing them to be close to her.

This may have been the most terrifying conclusion that Annie reached early in her teenage years, a conclusion that unfolded as if it constituted a significant scientific discovery. Her reflections appeared to represent the tedious activity of psychological research. Daily, it seemed, she was absorbed in her attempts to understand a particular mood, sensation, or psychological event that previously had been misunderstood or ignored. Somewhere around her thirteenth year, she reached the conclusion that what her mind had done—"long ago" she had determined that her body worked independently from her mind, although this conclusion, too, would eventually be altered—was chew up and digest her parents. She determined that something had gone wrong in her development. Describing herself as defective, she conjured up the image of ingesting parts of her parents, the very parts, she quickly recognized, she most despised.

The process was similar to mimicking the qualities one dislikes in another person—but not any person, only special persons. One way to rid the person of the qualities one finds distasteful is to eat them away. One does this, after all, with food. First, the food is presented beautifully on the plate. It seems a tragedy to touch it, much less devour it. By all rights, Annie would say, when something beautiful is laid out in front of you, you should either leave it alone or destroy it. The handsome painting or sculpture can always be destroyed. It hardly takes sophistication to understand why a child would destroy her parents' most prized possession, she thought. Clearly one is breaking a piece of one's mother or father.

Destruction of a beautiful painting, Annie also described, had political ramifications. One makes a bold public statement indeed when one destroys not merely a personally prized object but a public treasure. The point was to leave the beautiful object or person exactly as it was or

destroy it for personal and public gratification. Destruction, therefore, was not simply an impulsive action as, for example, deciding suddenly to have one's ears pierced. Destruction had reason behind it. It was neither thoughtless nor a simple rebellion. For Annie, rebellion, like revenge, represented retrogressive action. One never gets even with anybody, of this she was convinced. She said this often. One hurt somebody simply to hurt that person. And no one could dispassionately judge whether hurting someone was equal to one hurting you.

The point stood: no rebellion, no revenge. The history of the action that had upset her in the first place could never equal, much less be identical to, the action of retaliation. You either leave the beautiful painting on the wall, she would remind herself, or you rip it to shreds. As for eating beautifully prepared food, that she found absurd. This is why people photograph food on the plate. Of all the bizarre reactions to beauty, she said, nothing could compare with stuffing food into your mouth, transforming it, and most important, making it disappear for good. Then again, if food came from her mother and was meant to be nourishing but was not, then it might not be absurd to eat it after all.

It should be noted here that Annie often used the word *absurd*. What the others called yucky or gross was for her absurd. Absurdity was like a disease. Starting slowly somewhere in the body, it came to light spreading its tendrils into everything, a metastasis of the absurd, with the effect that anything and everything could become absurd for her and then suddenly lose its meaning altogether. How satisfying this metaphor was for Annie. It grew to be another of those silencing mechanisms. When something became difficult or painful, she could obliterate it merely by labeling it absurd. Someone's question was absurd, changing underwear was absurd, so was combing one's hair and brushing one's teeth. And so were the conversations with her mother. The only things not absurd were her brothers' fights, especially when her father joined the battles. It was the sexual nature of the fighting, she decided, that kept them all alive. Neither her father nor Timothy had much going on the feeling side of the ledger. But when they fought, they were alive and vibrant. In those ugly moments, nothing about them could have been called absurd.

Even at thirteen, the lovely girl with the long straight hair and elegant thin nose appeared to be neutralizing the power of objects, ideas, feelings, and entire experiences. It was not an all-consuming task; there were periods of grace, excitement, and delight. Still, a great deal of

energy was devoted to siphoning off the psychological life from objects by designating them absurd and then sucking their energy into herself. This is what had brought her early on to the notion of eating bits of people and objects she disliked. It afforded her the private gratification of destroying those transformed yet still disliked portions. In her own language, consuming someone else's ugliness cleansed that person for others. Disgust was deleted. So there was a self-destructive aspect to it; this she acknowledged. But there was a generous, gift-giving aspect to it as well. Stimulated by what she called the "algebra of staying alive," she devised psychological formulae for herself. The following is one.

She shared a mother with her brothers. For that matter, she shared one woman with three men. All of them appeared to suffer from being alive at the same time as their mother. No one in the family would ever admit this to anyone and especially not to themselves; it was taken as a given. According to her daughter, Jeanne Mansard was breathing death into her family. She was polluting them and making them ill. Annie would laugh to herself, "Mother pollutes us to the tune of three packs a day. And she does not even have to inhale her own debris. She leaves it around for us to breathe and eventually drown in, although that is not her conscious plan." It may well have been unconscious, Annie debated on more than one occasion. Perhaps her mother really did wish for the family's destruction. There are many ways to murder people, but the perfect crime is the psychological destruction of the soul.

"You did it to them, Mother," Annie would write. "You did it because you always hoped all three of them would fight each other to the death, and then you'd be free and able to tell the world, I did exactly what I was meant to do: get married and have children. I was a wife and mother, right? So I was complete. Isn't that what was wanted of me? Nobody can blame me if I'm free of all that because I did do it, and they were the ones who killed themselves. I never touched them. You saw me. I stood there and begged them to quit. You saw me, Annie. You saw how I urged them to quit, how I demanded that he break them up. You're my witness."

And in her mind, Annie assumed the role of star witness at a trial in which the entire family became judges and attorneys and, in the end, jailers and prisoners.

The psychological solution was to save her family by destroying the sort of disequilibrium she had learned about in algebra class. She could remove pieces of the equation no matter on what side they fell by



ingesting them. That is what her algebra teacher had preached. "If you take it away, Annie old girl," Mr. Daltman would say, leaning his face next to hers—"a little too close, don't you think, Mr. Daltman, for a crummy old ninth-grade class"—"if you take it away from one side of the equation, it's got to appear somewhere on the other side. Numbers don't just disappear. I mean, you didn't eat the quantity, you merely subtracted it. Nothing just disappears. You took it away so the other quantities on that side would feel a little lighter. But now, Annie old girl, you got to put it back. That's only fair, isn't it? You didn't eat it, did you, Annie?"

"Move away from me," Annie described wanting to tell him,

with your smelly face. It's bothering my thinking, and everybody in this room knows what you're doing, or would like to do when your face gets that close, 'cause we're the sophisticated generation, Mr. Daltman. We know which end is up. But I do like the idea of making one side of an equation a little bit lighter by eating it. If it's all right with you, I don't want to put it back on the other side. I'm just going to take little bits away, away from her, Mr. Daltman, and that way all of us in the Mansard equation will be a little bit lighter. It's absolutely ingenious, this idea of eating bits that nobody likes. And you know why it's going to work, Mr. Daltman? Because it's perfectly absurd. You'll see, everyone's going to end up happier. And that's all that counts in the big equation, isn't it, Mr. Daltman? Making everyone in the equation happier? So if you're worrying about what happened to that one quantity in little old Annie's equation, I'll tell you, as absurd as it sounds: I ate it, Mr. Daltman. Honest to God, I ate it, although I almost said I hate it. Now, Mr. Daltman, what do you think that means? Hate and ate? Would you say that's like mixing apples and oranges? Well, it is. It is just as absurd, thank you very much!

It was amazing how many days felt pleasant to her. One of Annie's favorite expressions went, "It isn't always bad." Truth be told, her attitude toward being alive was impossible to fathom, even though she tried her best. She told herself that even as she went to understand the patterns of her moods, they would shift, and she lost any chance to analyze or photograph them. Part of the time she believed herself to be on a roller coaster, one moment feelings running high and fast, the next moment, everything slow and immobilized. At other times she felt herself to be ambling through life in what she called "submerged tones." Her style, she determined, was slower and more deliberate than that of

other people. But no, she corrected herself, it was not style; it was the constant feeling that things felt heavy, that life weighed down on her.

For Annie, it was not proper to go through a day without having some goal, some serious purpose. Clearly that was her parents talking. Every instant for them had to be a learning experience, or so she reported. They despised small talk, the meager descriptions of what happened at school, or the amusing things befalling a classmate in the cafeteria. The Mansards wanted grade talk, college talk, intellectual inquiry talk, and proper grammar talk. That was the worst for Annie. Could they not understand that sometimes, when one gets excited about something, one does not speak correctly, as especially her mother invariably demanded? It became a curse, the constant need to watch what she said—watch herself—in the presence of her parents. They appeared to be listening, but it was not the content of her communications to which they attended—it was her language.

“So anyway, me and Cynthia went out after—”

“Cynthia and I.”

“Cynthia and I. We went to the caf and who’s there but this kid.”

“What kid?”

“I’m about to tell you.” Her anger already was building. “There’s like, this kid, Neil, you know.”

“A kid, and no I don’t know.”

It went on like this until finally Annie, utterly frustrated, felt her energy reduced to nothing. But when she made a move to walk away, it was her parents who grew angry. The pattern repeated endlessly, and always she told herself these words, as if hoping they would conclude the exchange: “You’ll see, someday I’m going to do one thing right.” Later she would think, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful to have something written on my gravestone that was grammatically incorrect? Those two would be so busy correcting it, they’d forget I died.”

“Here me lies. Like, there ain’t no ’nother one down here but I. Resting in pieces, sincerely yours.”

Francine Cavanaugh remembers teaching her first class of Junior English at Bristol Town High School. She could see at once that her students were interested in books and curious about a variety of matters. Affluent looking, despite the overalls, work shirts, and sloppy jeans, most of Ms. Cavanaugh’s advanced study Junior English students had completed most of the summer reading assignments. She remembered clearly the first discussion about the nature of the hero in literature. She

remembered, too, the girl seated at the desk near the window, beneath the poster of Windsor Castle: Annie Mansard.

There was a special look about this studious young woman. She took notes, consulted her books, and communicated a host of gestures that signaled her attentiveness. Annie, she recalled, was one of the only students whose full names she had memorized by the end of class.

Francine Cavanaugh had to smile when she thought about her first Bristol Town classes: so many bright students but what burdens they lived under. Every one of them was getting pressured by parents. Many students had older siblings who had performed successfully, which meant that teachers approached them with still higher expectations. "You must be Timothy Mansard's sister." More pressure. Then there was the school itself, with its lofty standards and ideals, competitive test scores, and need to maintain an outstanding reputation in the state. It did not look good if graduates shunned college or the number of seniors admitted to prestigious colleges declined. More pressure.

Francine was the first to admit she was haunted by Annie's presence in the school. There was the student's fierce dedication to learning and gaining admission to one of the so-called better colleges and the fact that she could be so outstanding and still attract people to her. Annie was reading five times more than anyone else in the class—five times more than anyone she had ever taught. Always the good looks, and always the sadness. It seeped through the personality, Francine would say, as a slow but significant leakage. And it brought forth a message. Still, it was not her role, Francine believed, to intervene in the personal lives of students. After all, she was not a psychiatrist. If a student volunteered something, it was legitimate to talk it out. But teachers had to know their place as educators, not psychotherapists. Still, anyone could see that Annie needed help. With the whole world seemingly hovering about her, she displayed a deep sense of aloneness.

As best as she could recall, Francine met with Annie no more than six times during the student's final year in high school. No real friendship ever evolved. No matter, senior year for Annie was filled with tribulations, and Francine, now in her second year on the faculty, felt more a part of the institution and its rituals. Annie had her chums; Francine had a new class of eager students. No one in her classes was as compelling as Annie Mansard had been that first day of school a year before, but who was to say that the attraction to Annie had not derived from the fact

that Annie was the first person to be noticed in the first class on the first day in a new school?

It is always sad, Francine would think, when friends separate or a friendship fails to materialize. Teachers, of course, are used to this, but Annie was different. But had Francine failed to notice the clues? Was that not what they always said about cases like this? There are always clues; it is just that the witnesses choose to look away. Yet she had not chosen to look away. Anyone could see she was not responsible.

Francine would take a leave of absence from the school the year after Annie's graduation and leave the state forever the following spring. On her final day in Bristol Town, she would pay a visit to the cemetery to have her last talk with the attractive young woman who she first saw, face so alive and bright, although not without sadness, on a brilliantly clear morning, sitting so poised at the desk near the window, beneath the poster of Windsor Castle.

Six weeks after graduating from high school and with her family believing she was making plans to attend the prestigious university to which she had been accepted, Annie Katherine Mansard committed suicide. At the time of her death, she was eighteen years, one month, and three days old.

## DISCUSSION

There is perhaps nothing as frustrating for social scientists than drawing patterns of human behavior only to know that these patterns can never do more than suggest or indicate behavior. On occasion, the interpretation of behavior actually shapes the behavior. Similar to social scientists, family members make these same sorts of interpretations and constructions. A host of variables and courses of action make sense to the researcher, but evidently, only a small portion of behavior can be accounted for by any series of studies.

Studies of suicide bear this out (Maltzberger and Goldblatt 1996; Roy 1984). Broken homes, a ubiquitous if not politically correct term, once dominated the thinking of suicide researchers. It is, of course, a misleading catchall, since any form of deviation from normal routines and circumstances may appear to constitute a so-called broken home. To the actual family members, a separation, divorce, or even abandonment

of the family by one member may not be construed as breaking the home.

While the term *broken family* fails to delineate the precise nature of a particular family's stress, it nonetheless carries a peculiar power. There is danger and violence, abuse perhaps, and an almost warlike assault carried in that term *broken home*. If by now it is not overworked, the term should imply that something momentous has occurred. The family system has broken into pieces, something of a precious and portentous nature has been destroyed, or at least it seems so in the minds of some of the members.

Some have suggested that broken homes serve as foundations for teenage suicide. A father or mother has violently or permanently quit the family, or fighting frequently marks the family's history. A series of powerful events has taken place, which has profoundly altered the destiny and internal makeup of the child.

Employing the language and concepts of family systems theory, the Mansard home revealed several characteristics often found in so-called problematic families.

First, there was the boundary-less behavior, the confusion of roles, and the infusion of one person's emotional world in to the emotional world of another, with the result being an internal chaos whose origins a young child could neither fathom nor explain. Second was the parentification of a child (Minuchin 1974) by the transforming of young Annie Mansard into the family peacekeeper, a role she felt to be essential for the well-being of her family yet one she found impossible to enact.

Third, there was the matter of her having to play the role of perfect, successful, calm, and happy child—and all of this undertaken in part to preserve the image of the family as successful, happy, and perfect. In truth, the acts are indeed shams, and the child, already feeling defective from the shaming rituals that were so often part of the family's interactions, experienced the same degree of psychological isolation that her family too had created. Isolation was her only armor. At some level, they all felt ashamed and defective.

That even at a young age Annie knew there was something wrong both with her and her family speaks to the notion of how precisely the internal world, the world of self-consciousness and identity (May 1983), derives in great measure from the world of social interactions and especially the world of the family. It is essentially from family interactions that children derive their sense of the inner world as well as

their ongoing definitions of the substance of this world. Profound calculations of their own sense of independence, autonomy, confidence, intelligence, competence, and worth derive in great measure from the sorts of interactions born in families. To listen to Annie was to learn that she believed this to be so.

Fourth, there is the almost prosaic matter of family communication, which in the case of the Mansards was complex indeed. They communicated through words, fighting, gestures, music, yelling, and by interpreting behavior. They communicated directly and indirectly, appropriately and inappropriately, with coalitions forming, coalitions dissolving. They hated as they loved and expressed independence even as they sought nurturance and attachment. Just as they knew things had gone seriously wrong, so too did they communicate to each other how they themselves felt wronged. They blamed, and they accepted blame, and in the end, they found that even the most elemental family decisions were transacted with unneeded complication and tension. And always the inside worlds were confused with the outside worlds, the lack of boundaries serving to weaken friendships on one hand while threatening individual psyches on the other. The violence that raged on the kitchen and dining room floors raged in their minds as well. To hurt another, one hurt oneself; to hurt oneself was to hurt the others.

Like most significant social psychological phenomena, youth suicide typically does not come as a bolt out of the blue. To some, it may seem this way, but its signs, symptoms, and warnings—in most cases, although not all—have been evident for awhile. Suicide, furthermore, is not the result of one distinct event or experience. It is the result, usually, of long-standing day-in, day-out personal and social experiences that drive people's anger and despair to the point of self-destruction. Somehow, the child's anger gets directed at him- or herself; somehow the child's pain is more than he or she can endure. Anger is not the only emotion involved in suicide. Studies reveal depression to be a common companion of suicide (Novick 1984; Sabbath 1969). Still, no one emotion and no single event can explain an entire piece of human behavior, destructive or not.

People undergo profound changes, particularly during their childhood and adolescent years, or conversely, resist the inevitability and naturalness of change and evolution. Either way, their family responds in one manner or another. A child has "acted up" at school. He is the classroom terror, uncontrollable and a notorious problem for his

teachers. Then suddenly, and for want of a better explanation, maturity seems to take hold and the child's grades improve, his demeanor is of a different quality, and he has taken a wondrous turn. Conversely, the once excellent student falters; the well-behaved child becomes brittle, recalcitrant, and bitter. The once happy child appears depressed, withdrawn, and demanding. Teachers and parents perceive new qualities in the child and new facets of an emerging personality. Sometimes these facets are welcomed, sometimes they seem frightening.

Something intriguing does indeed take place during the middle school years. It has to do with subtle transformations not only in the child but in those who describe the child and thereby construct the child's world. In our culture, anyway, as children enter their teens, the words used to describe them take on greater psychological import. Simultaneously, less technical and human terms seem to fall out of usage. *Modesty* and *shyness* vanish, and *disturbed*, *hostile*, *rebellious*, *aggressive*, and *depressed* assume new importance. Now the children come to be described by hard-core psychological if not pathological labels, which only naturally affect their conceptions of themselves and one another. Labels construct, as the Mansards learned, even as they describe (Gergen 1985).

There is no denying the cognitive maturity and psychological sophistication of many young people. But even in saying this, one wonders whether we have stumbled over one of the most complicated obstacles to understanding the suicide of an adolescent. Why is it, for example, that so many children, even as they move into adolescence, are such vigilant purveyors of the so-called psychological scene, their own and everybody else's? Does this derive from their natural drive to understand their own being or from the work they perform in family interactions? Will we ever know why some children become consumed with psychological pressures, their own interior worlds, and their own interiority? Why some children spend so much time ruminating on their interior worlds is answered in part by the simple phrase: because—for the first time in their lives, cognitively—they can.

Once engaging in personal ruminations, why is it that some adolescents reach the conclusion that so little of value exists inside and what is there is worthless, damaged, and defective? Is this too linked to family interactions and, more specifically, to rituals of shame? Does a sense of worthlessness perhaps grow from these interactions and the experience of pain? Is it true, moreover, that this pain, this extra parcel of authentic

human sensitivity, is the result of constantly having one's self-esteem, not merely one's self-concept, challenged by the world as well as by oneself? Is it the case that many young people battle the poison of shame (Kohut 1987)? And does this same pain, derived from family worlds, create a sensitivity or a numbness that many teachers detect, and worry about?

The term *broken home* seemingly describes so much it barely describes anything at all; hence, in the end it may not be useful for making sense of adolescent suicide. Yet if that term *broken* connotes a broken spirit, a broken will or esteem, then it may prove useful after all. Many suicidal youngsters feel that after years of taking a pounding of one sort or another—a pounding others may know little about and some of it, actually, self-induced—they finally feel something break. It may seem to an outsider as though one particular event brought down the house of cards, but having sustained a heavy bombardment for a long period of time, the house was ready to go.

From the outside, the Mansards were hardly what anyone would have designated a broken family. Neither Jeanne nor Bill Mansard ever spoke of divorce or ever thought of abandoning the family. They never engaged in physical fights between themselves. Bill drank every so often but never exhibited unusual behavior on those occasions. From the outside, the Mansards appeared to be a successful family: respected, attractive, liked, and surely well educated. But are we now combing through not superficial material exactly but the stuff of which so-called broken homes presumably are constructed? It is difficult indeed to follow a family, especially one that had its share of crises, and not reflect on the signs that may have been missed and the warnings overlooked, when later on a child decides to take her life.

Feeling the child's hurt, one examines the evidence with a degree of self-doubt and even self-blame. In the long run, it is not a missed clue but a missed life—a series of missed lives. Anyone even slightly implicated in the interpretation process finds oneself caught up in the sadness, guilt, rage, and pity that lie so heavily in the rooms and passageways where a short time before a child lived. One's words come out so naturally in the past tense, it is as though the whole family has died instead of just one of its members. And in a sense, a whole family has died. As Luterman (1979) suggested, when deaf children are born into families, to some extent all family members become deaf.



A lingering danger is that one can write about a family that has experienced a suicide in such manner that the whole experience all too quickly disappears into the past. Or is it that a researcher suddenly discovers that he has become, in some small measure, a member of someone else's family?

In the end, the Mansards were a broken family. They were broken by Annie's death at age eighteen, and as they would later recount, they were broken long before that.

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