

*Even now, at night when I close my eyes, I can sometimes still hear her. Footsteps crunching on the gravel path, growing louder as she nears the cabin. There's a pause as she inhales and exhales one last drag on her Salem before crushing it out in the dirt. The screen door whines as she teases it open. Then she tiptoes across the rough wood floor to my bed, and on clear nights her body casts a shadow over mine in the moonlight.*

It was the summer before the Beatles, before Kennedy got assassinated, before sex. I mean, other people had had it obviously, just nobody I knew.

I was 14. She was 28.

I'd never heard the L-word before. None of us had—well, except maybe Ls, but they kept it pretty much to themselves in those days, for obvious reasons.

I'd never heard any of the other words either: *Sexual abuse. Molested. Incest. Pedophile.*

I'd heard of *rape*, but I had no idea the term applied to me. Actually, it took me about thirty years to figure out the rape part—and that it never had a thing to do with whether or not I was a lesbian, or the fact that she was.

I knew what we were doing must be somehow wrong, but I never blamed it on her. The problem was the crushing small-mindedness of “society,” which is how she explained it. And I couldn't afford to see it any other way without having a breakdown. That would come later.

Nobody else called it rape or sexual abuse, either. How could they, since it took place in the dead of night when everyone else in the cabin was soundly sleeping?

It happened at an all-girls camp high up in the Adirondack mountains on a freezing lake we shared with fish. For eight weeks every summer I escaped the anger and disappointment that shrouded my family home like a permanent fog.

Camp Paradox felt like my true home. Before my first summer there at age twelve, I never dreamed that a quirky, possibly crazy, individual such as myself could find a place among the rich alpha girls from Manhattan, Westchester, and the snooty Five Towns of Long Island. But, miraculously, at camp everyone was, if not equal, then accepted—even the dorks. That's because as soon as the bus pulled through the camp gate, our checkered histories were forgotten. Everyone was granted a clean slate. We could become someone new, someone freed from the labels our families and friends slapped on us back home: in or out, overly sensitive or mean, fast, plump, skinny, smart, retarded, or, worst of all, average and, therefore, invisible.

Then there were the counselors, the bronzed muscular goddesses we worshipped and adored. We all had our crushes. Like the war between the Blue and the Gray teams or frenching the sheets of the new girl, falling in love with the counselors was a camp custom. They were so cool, so smooth and knowing, the way they laughed and smoked and teased us—not like any women we'd ever known, especially our mothers.

We were mad, hungry, juicy, flirtatious girls who could barely contain the energy coursing around in our bodies. It felt as natural to fall in love with one of the female counselors as it did to lust after Rob, the heartthrob stablemeister. And it felt safe to practically die of love for them because we knew nothing would ever come of it. As desperate as we may have felt at times, our lovesickness had a built-in cure: unbreachable boundaries between Them and Us.

Except, as it turned out, for me.

My boundaries were blurred forever the night my counselor, Maggie, who I regarded more as a kindly big-sister substitute than a crush, slipped her hand beneath my scratchy gray wool blanket. It was late at night and all the other campers in our bunk were fast asleep. Maggie and I had stayed up late, talking—as had become our custom. Or rather, I did the talking, confessing secrets and fears I'd never told anyone, while Maggie assured me over and over that I was simply human, not crazy after all.

When she slipped her hand under the blanket, I was too shocked to move or breathe. I didn't move or breathe when she brushed her hand across my peanut breasts, then slid it under the elastic of my pajama bottoms. I just lay there, speechless and completely still. I stayed that way as she gently began to stroke me, then found her way to my most private and tender button. I was frozen and hot, frightened and hungry, wet, ashamed, and utterly silent when the waves started to come and sweep me away, right out of my childhood into a nameless sea.



Thirty years later I got a call from an editor at *Redbook* asking me to write a story on recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse—true or false? The door of secrecy had recently been blown open, and new cases were making headlines every day. A titanic eruption was underway in families, courts, and therapists' offices, and the experts were squaring off: those who believed in the validity of repressed memories versus the nonbelievers, who coined the term *false memory syndrome*.

“What I'd like you to do,” explained Gwen, my editor at *Redbook*, “is to get to the bottom of all the hullabaloo. Let's give our readers some guidelines for assessing whether a memory is true or false.”

Interestingly, not once during my interviews with experts did I consider my relationship with Maggie. Since I had never forgotten what took place between us, I assumed that the subject of repressed memory had nothing to do with me.

But before I sat down to write, I realized I needed more than just the word of experts, so I decided to bone up on some of the stories of sexually abused women. I picked up a recently published book, *Secret Survivors: Uncovering Incest and Its Aftereffects in Women*, by psychotherapist E. Sue Blume, and stretched out with it on my sofa. It was a snowy afternoon a few weeks before Christmas. Blume got my attention on the first page when she warned that “Incest may not be what you think it is,” then went on to explain that the traditional view of incest as sexual activity between blood relations is much too narrow.

She wrote that, “If we are to understand incest we must look not at the blood bond, but at the emotional bond between the victim and perpetrator.” The new definition, accepted by both survivors and the therapists who work with them, is that “incest—unlike abuse by a stranger or acquaintance—*violates an ongoing bond of trust between a child and a caretaker.*”

Even though it was freezing in my apartment, I broke a sweat and my heart was racing. I read on.

“Because the perpetrator of incest derives authority through a dependency relationship, incest has more serious emotional consequences than abuse by a stranger. Not only is the body violated, but the child’s trust and love as well.”

Now I was shaking, too, and I was only on page three.

“Even when a child is molested by a trusted coach, teacher, regular babysitter, mother’s boyfriend, she still experiences both levels of the abuse: the sexual trauma, by virtue of the power imbalance, and the violation of trust and boundaries.”

With that I curled up in a fetal position and began to weep—which is exactly how my husband found me when he came home from work a few hours later. I couldn’t speak, could only point to the book that had fallen on the floor.

And except for trips to the bathroom and the occasional foray into the kitchen, I stayed that way for the next several days—practically immobile, weeping, struck down by a grief I never knew I carried.

It was the first time in my journalism career that I missed a deadline.