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{IN HIS WORDS}

The Living Past

When I was a child something happened that in only a matter of minutes changed my life forever. The thing that happened profoundly interfered with my capacity to feel pleasure, to trust affection, to feel safe that I could risk being honest with those I loved. Worse, this confusing thing occurred not just once, but again and again, and to stop it from being repeated would have pitted me against an adult, which experience had taught me was a losing battle.

What could do all that to a child and leave no visible mark?

Fifty-two years ago, when I was eight years old, on a quiet weekend morning I climbed a flight of stairs to my best friend's apartment to play. A visitor appeared while we were absorbed in a game of Monopoly, a middle-aged relative of my friend, someone I'd never met before. That morning he molested me. Actually, *molest* is a vague term that I don't like to use because it's no more precise than *sexual assault*, or even the apparently clear word *rape*. Whatever you call it, the result was a violation of both my body and my spirit, as a man in his forties sexually fondled me and, although I was prepubescent, his skillful handling resulted in my first experience of pleasure there.

I said nothing to my parents about what had happened. I believed this man when he told me that all boys played with each other that way, told me that I liked it, that somehow I had signaled that I wanted him to do it. The second time I was maneuvered into being alone with him, he terrified me by being even more aggressive, by expecting me to reciprocate with him. That I resisted only made me seem, in my eyes, like I was being a bad boy, unfriendly to the adult's desires. Nothing in my young life had prepared me to handle this confounding situation.

This pedophile showed up at my friend's house at random intervals, months, even years apart, and during each of his absences I convinced myself that he would never appear again. Altogether I was ambushed four times, the last when I was eleven. By then I was primed to run away and no longer believed him when he claimed all boys did this stuff or told me that I wanted him to. In order to make sure I never saw him again I had to lose my best friend.

Other than my wife, I told no one about these experiences until I was in my twenties. I had tried my best while growing up not to think about it. By age twenty-five the memories returned vividly, accompanied by an ashamed rage. It took decades before this interference with my sexual and emotional development no longer haunted me and, in ways both subtle and profound, disrupted my relationships, especially when it came to trusting that someone who claimed to love me, claimed to want to please me, meant well.

Over the past forty years, in addition to dealing with my distress, I read hundreds of case histories and interviewed dozens of people who suffered worse sexual abuse: daily exposure to pedophilia and more invasive assaults by people who were more intimate and trusted by their victims than my, what shall I call him . . . the man who spoiled pleasure? I had managed to sift through the interruption and distortion of my first experience of sex and recover what I had lost—acceptance of pleasure and trust in love—but many others didn't have my advantages, or suffered abuse so severe that working through their memories and their effects was too strenuous, too heavy a burden to cast off altogether. Victims wrote memoirs, and their cases produced nonfiction books and supplied villains for thrillers, but I didn't come across a novel that allowed the reader to enter the living past, to feel what it was like to be molested as a child and then struggle to mature into a whole person despite the long-term effects. I wanted to write about all that, but I didn't want to limit the storytelling to my experience since what I had learned was that there were a variety of effects that had one aspect in common—the stubbornness of their grip.

Thus *The Wisdom of Perversity* is inspired by what happened to me, all about a childhood interrupted and an adulthood spoiled, but it is told through the points of view of two people whose ways of coping, because

of circumstance, had to be different from mine. Julie is an apparently well-adjusted wife and mother with an interesting job, a woman who is a little too compulsive about cleaning her house but otherwise would be superficially familiar to most readers. Her husband, her son, her friends do not know her secret, especially the ongoing secret that her capacity to feel pleasure, to trust love, has been crippled. She is in profound denial, not about the facts of what happened, but about the long-term effects of her childhood misuse by a pedophile, a bold pervert who also misused at least three others that Julie knows of. Two were eight-year-old boys: one a cousin of hers, Jeff, the other his best friend, Brian. The third, already a teenage boy, was a ward of the pedophile, exposed to his mistreatment for many years. Forty years after Julie was molested, she learns that her victimizer, now a decrepit man in his eighties, and his ward, a man approaching sixty, are accused by several young boys and girls of having sexually misused them. The accused are rich, the victims poor. It seems likely that these molesters will escape punishment; worse, they will continue to be free to damage others. Julie's guilt that she was silent for so many years, that her silence, and that of Jeff and Brian, allowed so many others to be damaged, spurs her to action, giving her a courage she didn't know she had.

The Wisdom of Perversity is told through Julie's and Brian's eyes to place the reader within their secrets, to allow the reader to know them not as strangers in a tawdry tabloid but as people who had no control over events whose effects last a lifetime; to feel what it is to be an eight-year-old boy and an eleven-year-old girl at the instant their childhoods were confused and, in effect, ended; to walk with them as they cope in middle-age; and to stand beside them as they decide whether they have the courage to save others, and perhaps to at last find their true selves.

When I was sexually misused as a boy, a more commonplace experience than anyone at the time dared imagine, acts of pedophilia were never talked about to children and almost always covered up to the public at large. Victims were expected to recover, or not, in secret. There were no lawsuits, *New York Post* headlines, confessional appearances on talk shows. It must seem to those lucky enough to have no experience of being sexually misused as a child that it's all out in the open now, given how pervasive the subject has been of late, given all the media attention. I wrote *The Wisdom of Perversity*

because those headlines and lawsuits miss what makes this act a life-crippling crime. Like many victims, thanks to the bravery of frankness and persistent self-examination, I have recovered the capacity to love and be loved, to enjoy physical affection and give it, but that I had to struggle at all, that decades of work were required simply to feel again an adult version of the delight and pleasure of being a child, is a story I was unusually well placed to tell. For me this imagined story provides me with a more profound recovery of what I lost than a recounting of my limited experience would be. Through the intense re-creation of a fiction, and reliving my distress through the struggles of others, my past has at last found an honorable and peaceful death.