

## Chapter 1

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# A Transformative Event

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September, 1985

During his August vacation and mine, I missed him daily. My therapy with Dr. Donald Coleman had started the previous fall. Every moment to myself, in the bedroom of the summer home that Will and I had built on Martha's Vineyard ten years before, I would seclude myself and write to him, pour my feelings out onto the written page, letters that were never mailed but somehow helped me bridge the gap and let me talk to him.

I was reliving an old coping mechanism from the past, but didn't know I was – letters I would write to my parents during most of my later childhood, letters to my father from the *Sea Hydra* and from Carmel, and to both of them while they were away in Moscow, and later, during their time in Indonesia, when I was 11. I'd forgotten that I did that very thing back then, didn't know that this compulsive letter writing was not so much about Dr. Coleman and missing him, his actual person, as it was about the old feelings of loss and missing. The letters I was writing were letters I had written to my father long ago.

The idea that for large segments of my childhood I had been abandoned by my parents was entirely foreign to me. They were good and loving parents, who simply had more important things to attend to. Growing up, I missed them; there was an empty space inside of me, no longer anyone to talk to as before, an empty space within, where they once had lived. I had no words for that feeling and don't remember having any thoughts about it. It was just the way things were. As I grew, that feeling of an empty space came from unremembered times and I was used to it.

In our first year, I must have told Dr. Coleman about my early childhood and the camp, but I'm sure that I felt nothing, other than a sense of alienation, as though I were telling someone else's story; mine, but not mine. But before the separation from him that summer, a major shift in our relationship had taken place. He'd become the one I wanted to talk to, and now that he was gone, I missed him. He had "become" my father in the transference – the father who had left me long ago – but I didn't think of it that way. It was all about him.

A second-year resident in psychiatry at the New York Hospital in White Plains, this was the background to what was going on with me when we met again, after

the long summer break. My first image is one of seeing myself, in that hour, stiffly sitting in that padded wooden armchair, as if rooted to the spot, his soft brown eyes steadily trained upon my face. I began to shift my body restlessly, from one side to the other, unable to strike a position that felt comfortable. Soon, the old oppressive silence began. It wasn't that I had so many things I wanted to talk about that I didn't know where to begin; or that there were things that I would have liked to be able to talk about, but couldn't. It was more that I couldn't think – there was nothing there, my mind a total blank, unable to access any thought or feeling.

After some time had passed, and I still hadn't spoken, I became aware of a strange sensation in my body, an unfamiliar mixture of numbness and tingling sensations that I could neither locate nor identify in any particular way. I vaguely remember mumbling something like, "I feel very strange." But the words that followed, his words, are as sharply etched in my mind today as the day they were spoken, and still echo in my ears. "Is it because I'm back, and you're back?" he asked me.

I do not recall the moment that his words entered my consciousness, nor having any thoughts about their import or their meaning when they did. I can only recall that I "heard" them, registered their sensory traces. In that very instant, it felt as though my entire body dissolved into a liquid pool at my feet. I no longer had a body. That was precisely how it felt. Some aspect of me did maintain the continuity of my existence, or so it seemed, but there is no word in our lexicon to signify the "I-being" that remained. One can only say that I retained some form of consciousness, a sentience of sorts, and that I was frightened. Or was I? I'm not sure.

As I can best recall, fear was not the overriding emotion. It wasn't even a feeling exactly; more a strange kind of wonderment, along with a slightly panicky feeling, perhaps. This "I-being," this disembodied entity that I became, suddenly felt as if it were floating high above us, just below the ceiling, and very clearly, unmistakably, felt itself, or herself, to be eight years old. How it knew, or how I knew, I cannot say. I simply did. The truly frightening part was that I wasn't in control of what was happening to me. I remember having a strange telescoping sensation when I "knew" that this was the moment of my reunion with my father. At the narrow, distal end of a long, dark tunnel, very far away, there was a tiny figure of a man. I could not actually see my father, but I could imagine him, I could feel my father's presence.

In the very next moment, my body reconstitutes itself and I am back inside. I do not know how my body and the "I-being" re-integrate. In one timeless moment, my body loses all of its substance and ceases to exist, and in the next, I'm back. I must have tried to describe to Dr. Coleman what happened to me, but our remaining time in that hour has left my memory, erased in its entirety by what had gone on before. Nor do I remember if we talked about it in the months to follow. We continued our work through the second year of my residency in White Plains, meeting twice a week, until June of 1986, when I began a two-year fellowship in child psychiatry at Brown.

In a way, the experience was more frightening in retrospect than it was at the time. It happened so fast that I was simply swept away and had no time to think. I'm told by people who have been under the influence of a psychoactive substance, such as LSD or mushrooms, that they can relate to the experience quite easily, but in some way, they are primed to expect the unusual. For me, taken so unaware and unprepared, it continued to be extremely unsettling, as though I could no longer trust my body. For me, it truly was a moment that "shook my soul to its core." My capacity for coherent and rational thought about the event was so debilitated in its wake that I could not take things one step further and try to figure out what relationship it might have had to something in my past. In truth, I did not want to; I was afraid to think. More accurately, I was afraid to think about the pain it surely must have signified. Perhaps that was why I couldn't talk about it with Dr. Coleman.

In time, I came to believe that in the context of the separation and subsequent reunion with Dr. Coleman, my father in the transference, his interpretation evoked the confusing amalgam of the successive separations from my actual father that I first experienced when I was four, and later, when I was seven and a half years old and again, after I had turned 11. (During the out-of-body experience, I felt myself to be eight years old, a "felt" experience, and not to be taken literally.) That parting happened the day our ship, an old American freighter called the *Sea Hydra*, sailed out of the harbor in Calcutta, in October 1945, two months after my father had arranged for our rescue from the prison camp.

The three of us were going to Carmel, California, across the Indian Ocean and through the Suez Canal, the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, all the way to New Orleans, and on by train to San Francisco. My father was left alone, a lonely figure standing on the dock, flashing the light of the sun from his silver cigarette case in hopes that we might still see him. I was old enough to remember that momentous event, yet I did not. Was this the event in Dr. Coleman's office that my disembodied self "remembered," but I could not?