

Growing Pains

BY CHRISTINE MELTZ

I've sometimes wondered what became of him. If I really want to scare myself, I think about what I'd do if I were to encounter him by chance on the street. Would he still have the power to fill me with terror or would I simply wither him with a glance of pity and walk by?

I did see him once long after that year of fear. I was in Grade 7. The year I got breasts and a period, this time for real. I was walking down the school hall, on my way to my next class. There he was just leaning against a brick wall, grinning at me insolently. I willed myself to walk by, but inside my stomach churned. He was three years older, probably about nineteen. He didn't look much different — the dirty blond hair — good-looking in an unkempt sort of way. I think his eyes were blue, but I don't really remember. He didn't say more than two sentences to me

"You sure have grown up. Maybe I should come and visit you again."

It was enough to send me scurrying to the bathroom where I threw up. After that I never saw him again. They must have sent him back to the reform school he'd probably broken out of for the day.

I met Billie J. the year we moved out to the lake. I was nine. He had failed several grades, so it was a little harder to determine his age. I guessed him to be about sixteen. He was naturally bigger than the other kids on the school bus; this and his bullying character made him an object of awe and respect among them. When he first took notice of me, it made me feel important. I had no friends yet among the other kids who lived on the lake. The two-mile walk home from the bus-stop along the wooded road seemed a long one. I learned to dread it.

I don't know how it started. The first time it was very cold. The pines were covered with ice. They looked so beautiful. I remember staring at them and feeling so exposed, as though they were watching. He told me he wanted to show me something. I was afraid to refuse so I followed him down the side road. When we could no longer see the other kids he pulled me close and began to feel me under my skirt. I resisted but he held me tightly all the while talking to me in reassuring tones. Feeling confused and ashamed, I told no one about the episode. The next time it happened he showed me his sex and asked me to kiss it. When I refused he used my hand to masturbate. It was the first time I'd seen an adult penis.

Then he started phoning me. I think my mother suspected something was wrong because I would jump whenever the phone rang. I dreaded its ring because it might mean that I would be summoned to meet him in the woods. I would then have to lie about going to a friend's house. I became nervous and withdrawn; I lived in fear and shame.

The kids on the bus started calling me his girlfriend; they noticed that I wasn't always with them all the way home. Ironically, the more I obeyed Billie J. the nastier he was to me in public. Once when I had provoked his displeasure on the bus, he walked over to where I was sitting and kicked me in the head.

When we were alone he confided in me. He told me his older sister was a slut, and his father was always drunk and often beat him. He once alluded to his father's sexual activities with his sister. Most of this I did not understand but it still registered.

One day he tried to penetrate me. It hurt so much I cried. When I got home and went to the bathroom I saw blood on my underpants. My mother had explained puberty to me a few months before, so I was convinced that this was my first period. I know now it was my hymen.

The last time Billie J. touched me remains most vivid in my mind. He came to my house with a friend. A weasel-like boy of the same age. My parents were out, but my younger brothers were quite intrigued as to why the neighbourhood bully wanted to go for a walk with their sister. I remember wishing with all my heart that my mother or father would appear and say I couldn't go. They didn't, so I went with him. Once we were in the woods I realized that he planned to share me with his friend. Just then, through the trees I saw my mother's car go by. For the first time I felt some courage and rebellion take hold of me and I bolted.

My brother's tale of going off with an older boy unknown to her elicited some suspicion and my mother went looking for me. I never told her any of what happened. Shortly after, Billie J.'s family left town.

It's strange how the mind works. It has compartments in which you can lock things away and forget they exist. I can't remember when the first memory came back to me. I must have been in my early twenties, when my university education seemed to be equal parts academic and sexual. At first it was hazy, with that surreal quality of dreams. Later there were fleeting sharp images, almost like snap-shots in my mind, that were quickly banished. Now they can be retrieved at will, though usually only when something happens to provoke them. Like it did during my last trip to Paris.

I'd gone to visit my younger sister who was heartsick at the prospect of spending Christmas so far away from home. Like many other girls, she was finding the transition from adolescence to adulthood a long and arduous one. A year in Paris sounded so romantic; as though your problems would all be solved, or at the very least left behind. In fact, she was finding the city of lights to be lonely. The comfort she was taking in croissants and chocolate was beginning to show. Always more on the plump side, she was feeling downright fat next to the slim, chic Parisiennes.

Despite having been raised in a liberal and open-minded family, my sister has always seemed to be unnaturally prudish. I found this curious and sometimes strange, but I attributed her excessive modesty to self-consciousness about her weight.

One night we were reminiscing about our childhood. Being ten years older than her, I had not been around for much of her growing years. She made reference to a neighbour's son who was about my age. She referred to his liking for little girls and then quickly changed the subject. My stomach felt queasy. A horror came over me and I quickly pushed the thought away. The old cowardice and shame took hold and I changed the subject.