Tobin, D. L., C. L. Johnson, and A. B. Dennis. 1992. "Divergent Forms of Purging Behavior in Bulimia Nervosa Patients." *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 11: 17–24.

Vanderlinden, J., and W. Vandereycken. 1988. "The Use of Hynotherapy in the Treatment of Eating Disorders." *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 7: 673–679.

Williams, G. J., K. G. Power, H. R. Millar, C. P. Freeman, A. Yellowlees, T. Dowds, M. Walker, L. Campsie, F. MacPherson, and M. A. Jackson. 1993. "Comparison of Eating Disorders and Other Dietary/Weight Groups on Measures of Perceived Control, Assertiveness, Self-Esteem, and Self-Directed Hostility." *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 14: 27–32.

Yerby, J., N. Buerkel-Rothfuss, and A. P. Bochner. 1995. *Understanding Family Communication* Scottsdale, AZ: Gorsuch Scarisbrick, Publishers.

Lisa M. Tillmann-Healy moved to Tampa, Florida in 1993 to join the Ph.D. program in communication at the University of South Florida, where she developed interests in relationship, interpretive, and narrative studies. When she breaks from scholarship, Lisa takes long walks and plays with her husband, Doug, whom she married on New Year's Eve, 1995.

Composing Ethnography
Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing
(1996)
Ellis, Carolyn
Bochner, Arthur P.
Walnut Creek, CA: Sage.
pp109-131

The author wishes to thank Art Bochner, Carolyn Ellis, Eric Eisenberg, Larry Wright, Linda Andrews, and Jennifer Pickman for their many careful readings of this text.

CHAPTER THREE

My Mother Is Mentally Retarded

Carol Rambo Ronai

In her 20s, my mother, Suzanne, was a full-figured, green-eyed blonde who tanned easily as she strolled the streets on her daily walks. Frequently, she evoked catcalls from the men who drove by. Now she is 60 years old, stands 5 feet 4 inches, weighs 200 pounds, and has the emotional maturity of a 7-year-old.

With a few exceptions, Suzanne is generally harmless. When I was a child, she was the one who yelled and stamped her feet in the store if she did not get her way. I was the one who gave in, hoping to calm her and avoid further embarrassment. One Thanksgiving she locked the entire family out of the house because, as she put it, "Everyone is ignoring me." On other occasions, she ruined holiday meals by pouting, yelling, or otherwise making a scene at the dinner table. Once she rolled up a newspaper and beat my grandmother so hard that she ripped the skin off the surface of my grandmother's forearm.

My mother's intelligence quotient score has been estimated by several psychologists in social service capacities to range from 65 to 80. Reading at a second- or third-grade level, she stumbles over the text and makes up phrases when she cannot identify words. Although she has no math ability, she possesses a wide repertoire of television and movie trivia.

When people first meet Suzanne, they don't know anything is "off" until they have spoken with her for a while. She monopolizes the conversation with talk of television and her life. Those who are patient find a way to leave politely after a few minutes; others bolt immediately. She is the butt of many jokes which, mercifully, are told behind her back or go over her head.

Suzanne enjoys hanging around malls and talking to salespeople, store managers, or anyone who shows an interest in her. On occasion she has been asked by nervous clerks to leave their store because they were concerned that she was shoplifting or driving away customers. She also watches a great deal of television, avidly reads children's books, colors in coloring books, paints by numbers, assembles simple crafts, and sings in the church choir. Giving the appearance of living a full life, she stays alone in an apartment paid for by a trust fund set up by my grandmother.

◆◆◆

There is no sociological literature on mentally retarded parenting. The research that exists has been published by psychiatrists and social workers. Their work usually conforms to the medical model in which having a mentally retarded parent is equated with having a pathological condition that must be evaluated (Tymchuk 1991; Stoneman 1989; Feldman et. al. 1986; Robinson 1978) and treated (Whitman, Graves, and Accardo 1989; Heighway, Kidd-Webster, and Snodgrass 1988; Peterson, Robinson, and Littman 1983).

The mentally retarded parents in these studies were evaluated by researchers using psychometric questionnaires. As participants in social service culture, they were readily available subjects, accustomed to answering surveys. None was empowered by this methodology to define their lives using any other categories except those presented by their caseworkers. Similar to Ellis and Bochner's (1992, 97) discussion on abortion research, mentally retarded parenting is "a subject so steeped in political ideology and indignation that its experiential side can be forgotten and neglected." Specifically, the literature has ignored the lived experience of children of mentally retarded parents. Because little is known about the relationship of mentally retarded parents and their children, few guidelines exist for how to act in various social situations, and identity construction becomes problematic.

In this paper, I use the format of a layered account (Ronai 1995, 1992) and a method called sociological introspection (Ellis 1991) to present my own experience of being the daughter of a mentally retarded mother. Following Ellis and Bochner (1992, 97), I explore issues such as "What is one's point of reference for knowing how to act?" and "What is it like to live through an experience that potentially

places you in a muddle of uncertainty, doubt, contradiction, and ambivalence?"

◆◆◆

According to a 1994 broadcast of *48 Hours*, roughly 90% of all mentally retarded people are thought to be victims of sexual abuse. I often wonder, was my mother raped or coerced? Did she agree to have sex with my father? Did he attack her as he attacked both of us when we lived with him? Can a retarded person give consent if she does not fully understand human sexuality? Why do these thoughts occupy my consciousness? Wanted, unwanted, the result of a sexual assault—why do I care?

◆◆◆

To understand my mother and me, you need to know that our relationship was embedded within the context of our relationships with my grandmother and father.

◆◆◆

When I was 8 years old, my father left us on Grandmother's (my mother's mother) doorstep. Shortly thereafter, he was arrested for indecent exposure. When news of his arrest appeared in the local newspaper, all of Grandmother's friends called to offer their "condolences." Although Grandmother was not wealthy, she came from a well-to-do family and had pretensions of being a socialite. My father's arrest humiliated her. In her anger, Grandmother informed me, "Don't expect much from me. I have to take care of you, but I don't have to like it. I told your mother to have an abortion, but she wouldn't. You shouldn't be here. You shouldn't be alive. You just shouldn't be, given the way Suzanne and your father are."

I shrunk inside when Grandmother said this. I had fantasized about living like a regular little girl, in a regular house, attending a regular school. I wanted normalcy so badly, trusted the situation too much, and from the great heights of hope I plunged into new depths of betrayal. I really was a scummy little girl. I really wasn't ever going to

be allowed to be regular, happy, and safe. It was stupid to think it could all work out, since it never had before. I just assumed everything was going to be all right. Now, I feared something was wrong with me and it had to do with who my mother and father were. My new existence was to be one of walking on eggshells, just like my old existence; except now, instead of avoiding beatings and sex with my father, I had to avoid the furnace blast of my grandmother's blatant hatred of me.

◆◆◆

The entire time I lived with my grandmother, she never cuddled, comforted, nor offered affection. She received my hugs, but never gave them. If she purchased a Christmas present for me (actually, she gave Aunt Kathy a small sum to buy everyone a gift, but Kathy added money of her own because she was embarrassed by Grandmother's penury), I had to approach her chair, reach out and down, and put my arms around her bony body and hug her. I was careful not to hug too hard, because she was fragile. I was careful not to hug too lightly, because the hug might seem insincere. She always told us that we took it for granted that she was financially supporting us. A fake hug would be a sure sign she was right.

If I brought her flowers, she would put them in a glass of water and say nothing. One evening, when I was a third grader, I created a "Greatest Grandmother of the Year" award for her using construction paper, tape, and crayons and awarded it to her in front of her friends. I asked her, "What do you think of your award?" She responded, "What do you expect me to do with that? Wear it to work?"

Grandmother daily told mother and me what an enormous favor she was doing by taking us in, describing as she did a life of bridge, cocktail parties, and social events she could not take part in. It was clear that we owed her a debt we could never repay. We brought the roaches with us (according to Grandmother) and we had destroyed her life.

◆◆◆

None of this gives me a clear reason to be angry at my mother. This was Grandmother's interpretation of my existence, not my mother's. So why is it that when I am with my mother I am just barely able to keep my anger in check and unable to restrain myself from correcting her speech

and behavior? I can't stand the way Suzanne breathes: how she huffs when she doesn't get her way; how she puffs when she is out of breath from walking because she has let herself get weak and fat; the way her outward affect is often so melodramatic that I can't tell what her emotions or needs "really" are because I'm forced to second-guess them through her obvious attempts to get attention. I can only last a few hours around her before I am enraged and making everyone's life miserable. Why?

◆◆◆

My mother stood nearby as he grabbed my small arm, practically pulling it out of the socket. "No," I said, planting my feet and pulling away, "I don't want to." "You know you like it," he said, pulling me toward the bed. "I don't like it today," I said, flinging all my weight in the opposite direction in an effort to counterbalance his pulling on me. If I put up enough resistance, sometimes he would give up, regarding the whole matter as not worth the effort. This time the strategy wasn't working. My feet were dragging across the multicolored shag rug of the efficiency apartment, burning from the friction. "No," I screamed, flinging my bottom to the floor as he continued to drag me. When I kicked at him and missed, he laughed affectionately, as if reacting to something "cute" I might have done.

Upon seeing the violence I was willing to employ, my mother intervened and pulled on my other arm. "It's her bedtime, Frank, let her be," my mother stated. "Since when?" he asked, dubious of my mother's motives, forgetting to pull me for a second. "It has always been 8:00, 'cause she has to get up to go to school in the morning," my mother replied, yanking my right arm, pulling me away from him. He thought about this for a moment, then pulled my left arm and stated, "That can't be right; it's too long to sleep." My mother and father pulled on me back and forth like this for several rounds.

Each time my mother pulled I leaned into her direction, hoping to break his grasp and run. Ultimately "logic" won out. "I'm her father and I'm setting a new bedtime, 8:30." I flashed a desperate look to my mother as she let go. "There's nothing I can do," she said, as she turned her back and left for the bathroom. "NO!" I screamed, vibrating from the effort to keep the word airborne. "No, no, no," I whimpered as he dragged me to the bed, raking my panties down my legs, scratching long red welts with his nails. "No," escaped from my lips, now barely a

whispered sigh as he parted my legs and descended, face first, between them. "You always like this once we get started," he said. "Not today," I replied, watching my mother watch from the bathroom doorway.

◆◆◆

I resent having to take care of her when she did such a poor job of taking care of me. She not only let my father beat me and sexually abuse me, sometimes even delivering me to him for that purpose, but she sexually abused me herself (see Ronai 1995, 415–416). According to Finkelhor and Hotaling (1984), 81% of incest occurs with the male alone, 11% with the female alone, and 9% with both. When both are involved:

> the abuse occurs on the initiative and at the direction of the male . . . when a female is a participant in such a situation, it is usually only in the sense of being an observer or being directed by the male to participate (1984, 27).

Similarly, Tymchuck (1992, 167) notes of mentally retarded mothers:

> Where purposeful abuse does occur, often it is a result of another person associated with the mother rather than the mother herself, including a husband or partner (either male or female) who is emotionally disturbed.

Reading this, I tell myself, "Remember she is retarded, didn't know better, was abused by my father also, and is as much a victim as I am." I see the words. I understand that others may think I should get over it, but I can't let her off the hook. I know she knew better.

◆◆◆

In the third grade I was exposed to an antidrug and crime program called Junior Deputies, sponsored by the sheriff's department. While participating in the program, I ran across the term *sexual molestation* in a pamphlet. I showed it to my grandmother who defined the term for me. Knowing these words described what my parents had done to me, I took the pamphlet to my mother and asked her the meaning of sexual molestation. She looked up at me, her eyes huge, as if caught in the glare of oncoming traffic with no escape, and said, "Something parents should never do to their children." I said, "Oh, you mean like what you and Frank did to me?" She turned away and said, "Yes." Nothing more was ever mentioned about this topic.

◆◆◆

I resent the imperative to pretend that all is normal with my family, an imperative that is enforced by silence, secrecy, and "you don't talk about this to anyone" rhetoric. Our pretense is designed to make events flow smoothly, but it doesn't work. Everyone is plastic and fake around my mother, including me. Why? Because no one has told her to her face that she is retarded. We say we don't want to upset her. I don't think we are ready to deal with her reaction to the truth. Something inside me longs to tell her so that she finally will be able to explain to herself the events in her life, yet I don't know if she would be able to understand this information.

Because of Suzanne, and because of how the family as a unit has chosen to deal with the problem, I have compartmentalized a whole segment of my life into a lie. It is not fair to blame my mother, but part of me cries out to her, "How dare you passively sit back while everyone takes care of you?" and "Why don't you demand to know what is going on around you?" and "Why does there always seem to be something everyone else knows that you don't, as if there is an inside joke circulating that no one will tell you because no one thinks you will get it?"

The government has contributed to the pretense that everything is normal. They won't certify her as too retarded to hold a job, but they will provide her job training. I worked many hours, on three separate occasions over an eight-year period, to get her vocational rehabilitation. Each time she stopped the counseling and vocational training the moment my back was turned. Since social service workers cannot force services on anyone, and since Suzanne has to want the help, no one can do anything about it. And so we go on protecting her from the truth, lying, keeping silent and pretending everything is perfectly normal. In a sense we are complicit agents in her failure. If she did not have us, if she did not have the trust fund, if she could not go on living this fiction, she would be forced to go out and get job training. When I was 5 years old, my father went to prison for a year and a half for sexually assaulting someone. During that time my mother obtained federal housing, food stamps, and other Aid to Families with Dependent

Children by following the social workers' instructions to the letter. When survival was problematic, Suzanne came through for us. So where is her fighting spirit now? Somewhere in my gut, I just *know* she is being lazy.

◆ ◆ ◆

Klein (1990) notes that children of mentally disturbed parents tend to develop coping strategies that exhibit exaggerated independence, autonomy, and self-reliance relative to their developmental stage. When I was 10, Grandmother said she was sick of supporting us and we had to find a way to contribute or she was going to kick us out. My mother and I applied for welfare, which included Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and food stamps. When my mother and I met with the social worker, my mother threw a temper tantrum, refused to answer questions or fill out any forms, and stormed out of the AFDC office. I panicked, asked the social worker to wait, ran after my mother, and begged her to come back. When she returned, I filled out the forms and answered the social worker's questions. Later, when my mother went to the bathroom, the social worker came to me with tears in her eyes, hugged me, and said, "God, this must be awful for you."

I saw myself through her eyes and realized what a spectacle my mother and I must have made, and yet it was OK. I was the kid here; it was not my fault. Someone finally understood how hard this was for me. Self-consciousness and relief swept over me, simultaneously flushing my face and filling my eyes with tears that I fought to control. "Poor baby," she said maternally, motioning to two of the other workers. The concern and sympathy on all of their faces were too much. My body went limp in her arms as the dam burst and tears flowed. I shouldn't have been doing this, but it felt so good. Crying was not allowed at home. When it occurred, it was handled much like masturbation—you do it in private and hope you don't get caught.

My mother came out of the bathroom, saw me crying, screwed her face up, and said, "What's she acting like that for?" The other two workers led her away from me, telling her that everything was going to be all right. Our caseworker took me aside and showed me how to answer the questions differently so that she could approve us for aid. It was important that these questions were answered the same way every

year. I understood that I was going to be responsible for this process from now on.

I went from tears to elation. I had gotten us the welfare. It was only $1,400 a year, $120 a month in food stamps, plus Medicaid, but that was substantial enough to impress Grandmother. Later, I explained the process to Grandmother, the amount of money we were to expect, and how I would have to stand in line each month to pick up the food stamps. She stared at me and said nothing.

From that moment on, I was the designated deal with government aid hitter. I ended up applying for Social Security for Suzanne (which she was not disabled enough to get), I arranged for her to go to vocational rehabilitation, and each year, I applied for welfare with my mother in tow.

As time wore on, my grandmother depended on me to run her errands at the Social Security office, buy her liquor and cigarettes (by 14 I already looked the legal drinking and smoking age of 18, so no one ever carded me), purchase certificates of deposit, balance her checkbook, and make out the checks to pay the bills.

◆ ◆ ◆

I look at what I just wrote. All of it is true, yet I haven't told you the worst of it. I am disgusted that this creature, Suzanne, is my mother. She is horrifying, vile, potentially defective genetic material, someone I or my child might take after. Half of all I am came from her, and the rest from Frank, the friendly neighborhood sexual psychopath. Most of my childhood training was placed in their capable hands. How do I explain this to myself? Are they who I am? Like it or not, their identities, their biographies, partially shape who I am.

I cannot let my thoughts dwell here for very long because none of this makes sense. There is no "right" answer to find. The meta-narratives on child rearing handed to me by psychologists and other child care experts do not match my experience. I am an assistant professor with a Ph.D. I have a good relationship with my husband. I have a healthy, happy baby. So why is it I often feel as if I am missing something? Am I missing something because my mother was retarded and my father a sexual psychopath? Or am I letting the idea that I am supposed to be missing something structure my discourse on my identity

and my emotions? Or is it that everyone feels as if they are missing something? How do I know when my feelings are normal?

◆◆◆

In *Newsweek*, a woman named Betty Graves, program director of "Parents Learning Together," said that none of the children of mentally retarded parents "is going to reach the potential they might have reached" (Kantrowitz, King, and Witherspoon 1986, 62). Reading this is a slam in the gut. I suspect many people worry about whether or not they have reached their potential. As I sit here typing this, I doubt my own abilities. I don't speed-read, my writing needs work, and I did not graduate from an Ivy League school. Always, I can hunt down deficiencies in my abilities and my biography that instill self-doubt.

This, in turn, makes me angry. How dare this woman tell me I am not going to realize my potential. Aren't retarded people and their children everywhere grateful for her existence? I hope her repressive discourse doesn't hinder her from realizing all her potential as program director. If she doesn't expect much from the children of her clients, she will not get much and she will burden them with cumbersome labels and a doubtful self-identity. Never mind that her remark in *Newsweek* has contributed negative discourse to the stock of knowledge about children of mentally retarded parents.

◆◆◆

Blowing off steam like that felt good. I was self-righteous, indignant, sure of myself. My ambivalence was held at bay. Getting angry is an excellent form of self-defense. I bring both Graves's selfhood and her potential discourse about my self into question. It allows me to dismiss the possibility that I will not reach my "potential," or at least it shields me for now from internalizing this idea into my identity.

◆◆◆

According to researchers, I don't have a good reason to bring my own genetic status into question: "90% of the known causes of retardation have nothing to do with heredity; many cases are the result of problems during pregnancy and childbirth" (Kantrowitz, King, and Witherspoon 1986, 62). Individuals throughout my life have reassured me of this point.

I was styling my Barbie doll's hair one Christmas when my uncle asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I answered, "A hairdresser." My uncle took me aside and said, "My worst nightmare for you is that you grow up to be a hairdresser and marry some truck driver. Take a look at your family. All of us except your mother have college degrees. You come from a great gene pool. Even your grandmother had a degree at a time when women didn't get degrees. You can do so much better than being a hairdresser." I will always adore my aunt and uncle. They had a very positive impact on my life. But what they could not understand is that, for me, assurance that I was "normal" implicitly called my normality into question.

Often my status was brought into question in more direct ways. I rarely invited friends over to play. If I told a friend about my mother's retardation, I considered it a major disclosure, a juncture in our relationship when either I would be rejected or the relationship would deepen. Sometimes I was rejected, particularly when I was younger, because my mother tried to play with us as if she were a little girl. One girl said, "Your mom thinks she is one of us but she's not. She's weird and so are you."

At other times it was the parents of other children who brought my status into question. Lisa's mother, for instance, liked having me around because she thought I was polite and a good influence on her childrens' manners. Starved for approval, I always washed dishes and said, "may I," "please," and "thank you," very diligently. When Lisa's mother finally met my mother, I was not allowed to play at Lisa's house again. Debbi's mother, on the other hand, let me play with Debbi, but only when Debbi's father was away. On the one occasion he came home early, I was asked to sneak out the back door.

I told these stories to my aunt and uncle when they visited. They informed me, "Anyone who would treat a little girl like that, because of her mother or for any reason, is not worth having as a friend." It made sense, but the sentiments still hurt.

◆◆◆

One evening, when I was around 8 years old, I came home from my friend's house at 6:00 instead of the agreed upon 5:30 curfew. Earlier,

around 3:30, I had called my mother to ask her if I could go to the mall with Cheryl and her mother. Cheryl's mom said that she could not get me home until 6:00. Having been interrupted from a television show, my mother quickly agreed I could stay out and hung up the phone. When I got home, my mother screamed at me, demanding to know why I was late. My grandmother, who occasionally acted as referee in these matters, calmly asked me why I was late. I said, "I called from Cheryl's and got Mom's permission." My Mom said, "She's lying, she never called." Stunned and afraid, not sure what my mother was up to, I said, "Did too and I'll prove it. Cheryl was there when I called you, you just don't remember." With her open palm, my mother slapped me, boxing my right ear into a temporary deafness that sent stars across my vision. I cannot show weakness, I thought to myself, because Grandmother'll think I'm lying. I held my ground and yelled at the top of my lungs, over and over, "Call Cheryl's and see, call Cheryl's and see." My mother grabbed me by the hair and pulled me into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her. I looked into her face as she beat me and realized she was enjoying it.

◆ ◆ ◆

Three years earlier, I was in the first grade. On the particular day in question, I had lied and told my mother that school was canceled so I could play hookey. It had worked one other time. She did not know I was lying until Collete, who lived downstairs in the same apartment building, informed her that her son had attended school that day. My mother called me in to hear Collete's accusation. I admitted I had lied and Collete looked at me and said, "Boy are you gonna get a whoopin'. If you were my little boy I'd whoop the tar outta' you." I looked up at my mother and she had a peculiar mask stretched across her face, something twisted, a cross between a rictus and a grin of anticipatory pleasure. She dragged me up the stairs of the apartment building, shoved me into our apartment, and slammed the door behind us. As if to excuse her from what was to come next, she said, "You know I have to punish you don't you?" She then proceeded to beat me, pounding me with her fists while I screamed out over and over, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I won't do it again." I fell to the ground in a fetal position to protect my face, gut, and head. She kicked me in the back, arms, and head, then leaned over and grabbed

at my arms and legs to unfold me, so that she could land some kicks to my more vulnerable insides. After two kicks landed on my chest, I scrambled up off the floor and ran. She chased me around the living room, swung at me, landed an occasional slap and tripped me to the floor.

When I got up, I looked into her face. There was no rage. There was no stern parent trying her loving best to discipline her child. She was having fun playing out this melodrama at my expense. Her role was the deceived parent, and deceived parents, according to Collete, "whoop" their children. I decided at this point to stop reacting to her. Maybe if I stopped playing, so would she. I passively stood in front of her and watched her face as I accepted five more slaps. As I took each blow, her face made me angrier and angrier. I had already paid for skipping school. This was beyond. Then I made a mistake. I yelled at her, "You like doing this just like Frank likes kicking you."

◆ ◆ ◆

My father, Frank Gross (no lie, pronounced "Graas") Rambo, had a police record as a child molester, a rapist, and an exhibitionist. He was also violent. Even though we were on public assistance, our lives were much calmer during the time he was in prison. Her beating me was an enormous betrayal. Yes, I needed to be disciplined, but this was not a spanking. This was the kind of beating Frank dished out.

◆ ◆ ◆

My mother's eyes lit up and caught fire. She balled up both fists and swung them together like a baseball bat and landed them on the right side of my head. The force knocked me to the floor. She screamed incoherently at me, enraged that I had missed school, that I thought I could fool her, that I had said she enjoyed doing this, and that I said she was acting like Frank. She kicked at me on the floor and stormed out of the apartment.

Later in the day, she was sitting with several neighbors on the porch, bragging about how she had given me what I had coming, sounding just like Collete. Collete praised her for acting like a "real mother." When I appeared on the porch, everyone became quiet and Collete shot me a smug, knowing look.

◆◆◆

Earlier that week Collete had swept the porch while I played outside quietly. Collete came up behind me and pretended to sweep me up. I giggled. She sat on a chair and said, "You know Carol, you're OK." I giggled in pleasure at the attention. Collete had a reputation for being dangerous and dishonest and her saying something nice to me was somehow flattering. "No," she said, "I mean you are all right, but your momma ain't. No, indeedy, your momma ain't right in the head at all, is she?" I said, "I don't know," frightened at this new line of questioning. She was tapping into all my secret fears, that something was wrong with all of us—my mother, my father, and me. "Yes, you do know child, that look on your face says you know. I just want to tell you that you are all right but your momma ain't." As Collete went back inside, finished with her sweeping, I could not decide if her words were supposed to be reassurance that nothing was wrong with me, or a warning that something may become wrong because my mother wasn't "right in the head."

◆◆◆

Later that evening Collete asked if she could borrow my mother's Social Security card. My mother, always a little scared of Collete, gave it to her with little hesitation.

◆◆◆

The next day I was playing at Big Carol's apartment with her 2-year-old son, Timothy. She lived across the hall from Collete, and I frequently spent time visiting her. I asked Big Carol, "Why would Collete want to borrow my mother's Social Security card?" Big Carol stopped cooking, turned to me, and said, "What do you mean?" I told Big Carol what Collete had said about my mother not being right in the head and my being OK and how she borrowed my mother's Social Security card. Big Carol laughed and said, "I suppose you are OK, but your momma should have never, ever, let nobody have her Social Security card."

Big Carol went to my mother, and later Collete, and made Collete give my mother back the card. As Collete went down the stairs, she said to me, "Child, you talk too much. This was no one's business but your mother and mine's. No one's business!"

◆◆◆

I had Collete, in part, to thank for my beating. I understood what everyone meant when they said Collete was dangerous. She had used my mother's "not being right in the head" as a way to get revenge on me for telling Big Carol about her "business" with my mother. Collete's message was quite clear: "Don't fuck with me or I'll fuck you back." Her smug look paired with everyone's silence was more than I could take. As I made my exit, I hated my mother for needing and enjoying Collete's approval, for beating me, and for not understanding what Collete was getting out of this.

◆◆◆

And here I was, at 8 years of age, standing, taking it from my stupid mother again, this time innocent of the crime for which I was accused. I said, "I called you, don't you remember? Or don't you want to remember? Are you enjoying hitting me?" This made her angrier. She remembered that I called; I saw it in her face. Perhaps she had forgotten, but she remembered now. Before, her "anger" was a staged thing, mocked up to match what she perceived as the necessary drama for the moment. Now she was really mad—mad that I knew the truth, mad that I had the nerve to accuse her out loud, and afraid. She had started this course of action and she could not withdraw from it, not after hitting me. She could not just go back out into the living room and say to Grandmother, "Oh yeah, now I remember, she did call."

So she proceeded to beat me with even more vigor and conviction. I was taking fists to the head, to the stomach, and to the sides. I did not try to get away, nor did I put much effort into trying to block her punches and slaps. I was on fire with a righteous fury. I knew I had called. I knew I was right and she was wrong, and I knew she was beating me for no reason. As she hit me, my face burned with the pressure of the blows and the tears. The burn in my face was merging with the burn of my fury. The beating became a kind of purification ritual. I started to "enjoy" the beating. The more she hit me the more guilty she became. The more guilty she was the more righteous I became. I was right, right, right, and that was all that mattered. The more she beat me, without my resistance, the more elevated I became as a being who was, once and for all, superior to her.

After about 10 minutes my grandmother entered the room and said, "Suzanne, stop it. I think she might be telling the truth. She's not acting like someone who's lying." This was a big deal because Grandmother felt that since I was Suzanne's child, she should not intervene in my mother's disciplining of me. If Grandmother had decided to get directly involved, this was major.

"Call Cheryl," I said. "You call her and I'll talk to her and her mother," Grandmother replied. I promptly got on the phone, and when Cheryl answered, I said, "My mother just beat me up for being late." My mother grabbed the phone, hung it up, and hit me again. "You shouldn't have told her that." My grandmother came into the hall where the phone was located and agreed with my mother, "You shouldn't have said that, give me the phone." Grandmother called and spoke for a while with Cheryl's mother, thanked her, hung up, and said, "Cheryl's mother said that Cheryl told her that Carol called here at 3:30, Suzanne. Are you sure you didn't forget?" My mother screeched, "Oh I don't know," threw her hands out at Grandmother as if to melodramatically brush her off, and stormed out of the room.

Not to be upstaged, I likewise flung myself onto the sofa and whined, "What is wrong with her? I was telling the truth and we all know it." My grandmother answered quietly, "She is mentally retarded. She isn't like other people. You have to make allowances for her." I quieted down and asked, "What's wrong with her?" My grandmother responded, "She has brain damage." She went on to explain that no one knows for sure how she became brain damaged. One possible cause was that Grandmother bled a great deal in the third month of the pregnancy. Another possibility was that my mother was delivered in under 45 minutes and that she may have suffered trauma from the speed of the delivery. Many things locked into place once I understood my mother was retarded. I had only one question. "Am I retarded too?" "No," Grandmother responded.

◆ ◆ ◆

Suzanne loved to play dolls. The only problem was that she always insisted on playing dolls her way—nicey, nicey. I wanted Barbie to rob banks, get her period—anything but fashion shows and tea parties. Mother always insisted the dolls play "nice," so I often left and let Mom finish playing dolls by herself, only to return later to play out a good plane crash.

◆ ◆ ◆

I believe my mother was once conned into posing for nude photos by a man we trusted, though I cannot be sure because I was not allowed to witness the actual event. He asked her if she would like to earn some money and she agreed. We went to his apartment while his wife was away, and he asked Mom to take off her clothes so that he could see if her body was good enough to photograph. Pointing at me, my mother said, "Not with her in the room." He promptly shoved me into a closet. I listened at the door while he gradually talked her out of her clothes. It sounded like he was snapping pictures. I will never know if there was film in the camera, or if this was just a ploy to get her naked. When she was dressed, they let me out of the closet. I was given orange candy and told not to tell anyone. He gave my mother $10 and as far as I know that is the only money she ever earned from her illustrious modeling career.

◆ ◆ ◆

In the first grade I had an inner ear infection that caused me to be deaf for six weeks. Some neighbors brought me a get-well present, saw my mother taking my temperature, and finally insisted I go to the hospital. My mother and father did not know a 106-degree fever was dangerous. I was out of school during that time and had my homework brought to me by classmates. My mother loved to do my homework, so I let her. When I went back to school, the teacher took me aside, explained that *all* of the answers on my homework were wrong, and that she was afraid I had fallen so far behind that I would have difficulty catching up. I suggested that the real problem might be that I was sick while doing my homework. I begged for another chance to make it up. She let me take home a different set of dittos, which I filled out in secret and returned to the teacher. She acted surprised and relieved that I had shown so much improvement. I, on the other hand, was shocked that my mother had missed so many "easy" problems, and I did not know how to account for it.

◆◆◆

Knowing my mother was retarded explained a great deal to me, but it also created new problems, new crises about exactly who she was and who I was. Sure, Grandmother was going to tell me I was OK, but she may have been telling me that just to make me feel better, the same way she kept retardation a secret from my mother. Maybe the whole world knew I was retarded too, kept it a secret from me, and laughed behind my back.

◆◆◆

I am being forced to unravel an emotional knot in my gut to finish this. My heart is racing, my hand trembling, my limbs limp. I can feel my center dissipate, bleeding outward, as if entropy will catch me up in its flow and I will fail to be. I despise feeling like this—vulnerable, scared, a little out of control. Yet, when asked by readers to dig even deeper (fucking vampires, draining the emotional life out of me), I come up with a truth that leaves me hanging in midair with nowhere to stand, as surely as if the floor had been yanked out from under me. What could this devastating kernel of knowledge possibly be? I have just discovered, through the process of writing this, of seeing it all before me on paper, that I am ashamed to love my mother.

◆◆◆

When we first went to live with my grandmother, my mother and I shared a bedroom with two twin beds. I went to bed each night several hours before my mother. Every night I stayed awake until she came to bed because I needed my mommy.

◆◆◆

Let me draw in a sharp, husky breath, tremble, and whisper it longingly in your ear again: I needed my mommy—BAAAD.

◆◆◆

I HATE this! I hate that fucking needy little girl. I hate it, hate it, hate it . . .

◆◆◆

I had the best mom ever! She played with me just like a girlfriend: cards, dolls, jump rope, make believe. Yeah, sometimes it was a pain. She could pull rank and remind me that she was the mother. Then we had to do what she wanted.

One day at school, it was third grade, Pat Suez was caught stealing candy from my friend Jennie's cubbyhole. Before that, Pat was a friend and we used to walk home together with several other girls. When she tried to walk with us this time, we all told her to go away. We yelled, "Thief," and "Pig," and one of the girls even threw pebbles at her. We all laughed.

Pat put her hands on her hips and said, "Carol, your mom likes me and you're going to get in trouble for making fun of me." I laughed at her. She clearly didn't know my mom! A couple of the other girls looked worried. "Just wait, you'll see!" I said. I never doubted my mother for a second. She would take my side in any argument with any of them. "You just go and tell her, piggy," I jeered gleefully, now leading the pack making fun of her. "And tell her what a fat pig thief you are too, while you're at it."

Everyone joined in laughing except Pat, who walked ahead of us and met my mom at the corner. My mom walked up to me and said, "What's this all about?" I answered, "We don't like her any more." My mother instantly turned to Pat, thumbed her nose at her and blew her a raspberry. My friends howled with laughter.

Pat stood staring and then ran across the street. She yelled, "I'm telling my mother you did that, Mrs. Rambo!" My mother turned around, bent over, her rear facing Pat, and raised her skirt. Some of the girls were laughing so hard they were crying; others were rolling on the ground. It was too funny—someone's mom acting like that to a kid. Pat started to cry and Mom mooned her again. It was like having a pet do tricks for your friends. "See, my mom is always on my side. Don't forget

it!" I said, playing it cool, as I walked off with her to the house. My friends talked about and relived the incident for a week. Pat found a different route home, and we never heard from her mom. My mom was the best ever. No one else's mom would have done that for them!

◆◆◆

When Mother got money at birthday and Christmas time, she would treat us both to lunch at McDonald's. Standing in line, it became routine for her to ask, "Do you want one or two cheeseburgers?" "Two," I would respond, grinning. She would giggle and say, "I want two, too." She always purchased for each of us two cheeseburgers, fries, a coke, a shake, and a pie, if we wanted it. I loved her so much for doing that. It was our gesture of resistance against Grandmother and her boring food. She never let us pig out like this!

◆◆◆

I betrayed my mother by growing up. Year after year we grew further apart until finally I abandoned her to the dolls, the coloring, and her make-believe world. She was not growing with me, and as time went by, she became an embarrassment and a liability.

◆◆◆

That was a shallow explanation of what happened. I trusted her and she betrayed me! She represented herself to me as my mother, but she was not a normal person, much less a normal mother. The world played a bad joke on me for years until finally Grandmother had to let me in on it. Once I knew about her, I had to reject her. To keep on loving her like a mom was to keep on being fooled. I could no longer trust her, the world, nor myself. Nothing was as it was supposed to be. I still needed someone very badly but I could not count on my father, my grandmother, or my mentally retarded mother. I was alone.

As I write, I grieve the loss of my love for my mother. I must face the reality that I am unable to love her again in the intense, unbridled way I did as a child. But she carried me in her womb and would not abort me when Grandmother begged her to. And she conspired to save

me from Frank and once even took a beating for me. But she also beat me, delivered me to Frank, and sexually abused me herself. She was strong and weak in the strangest ways. Yet she was my only stability growing up, the only thing that was with me consistently over the years. Don't I owe her something for that?

◆◆◆

There is no answer, no final truth to this conundrum—only ambivalence. I feel as if I live in the margins, waiting for this feeling to settle into something else, to transform, or to transcend. But there is no resolution, at least not yet. Try as I may, I cannot work it all out. I cannot label everything neatly and explain it to you, the reader, wrapped up in a neat, bundled conclusion. I feel ambivalent, one moment protective of my mother, the next furious at her, and the next profoundly sad. I want to avoid her and control her life for her, all at the same time. Thus my ambivalence is a feeling between moments, between labels, between feelings. This feeling serves as a marker in my consciousness, which proclaims: "A codified feeling label should exist here but it does not—remember that and do something about it later."

When I am forced to deal with my mother, it is all I can do to contain myself from being angry at her. I remember loving her when I was a kid. But I am alienated from that now and have no clue how to forgive her and tap back into that feeling again. I'm not sure I want to. I mostly feel guilty that I can't stand her, and I try my best to do "things" for her, monetarily or otherwise, so that I do not have to spend time with her. Mostly, dealing with her is just too damn much work; it always leaves me exhausted.

◆◆◆

When I first got pregnant, my mother commented, "It's sure been a long time." "A long time what?" I barked into the receiver with my usual impatience. "You know, a long time since you were little." A cold chill ran down my spine. "Yes, and . . ." I asked, obnoxiously, demanding she spell it out. "Well it's just been a long time since I had someone to, *you know*," she said. I did know. It was startling, grotesque, but I knew. My child represented her last chance to fully connect to someone again and perhaps

her last chance to grow up. Her first childhood occurred with my uncle John who was 3 years her senior. She had a second childhood with my aunt Kathy who was 12 years her junior. Finally, she had a third childhood with me, 29 years her junior. With Kathy and me, there was a time when we were her intellectual equals, roughly between 5 and 8 years old. Later, all three of us grew up and left her behind. Her implication was that somehow she could start fresh with my baby and, perhaps this time, she would mature with him and catch the last train into adulthood.

◆◆◆

I just reread that last passage and had to smile. If you had listened to my mother on the phone you probably would have heard nothing sinister, no *Twilight Zone* music, only an aging woman who wants the company of grandchildren. But her tone—if you had known her all these years—the voice of urgency, desperation, hunger, a junkie needing a fix. Then again, I've heard my girlfriends describe their mothers nagging them to have children. How will I ever know if I'm dealing with "normal" mother-daughter issues or those of a mentally retarded parent? Why must I?

References

Ellis, C. 1991. "Sociological Introspection and Emotional Experience." *Symbolic Interaction* 14: 23–50.

Ellis, C., and A. Bochner. 1992. "Telling and Performing Personal Stories: The Constraints of Choice in Abortion." In *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience*, edited by Carolyn Ellis and Michael Flaherty. (Newbury Park, CA: Sage): 79–101.

Feldman, M. A., F. Towns, J. Betal, L. Case, A. Rincover, and C. A. Rubino. 1986. "Parent Education Project II: Increasing Stimulating Interactions of Developmentally Handicapped Mothers." *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* 19: 23–37.

Finkelhor, D., and G. T. Hotaling. 1984. "Sex Abuse in the National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect: An Appraisal." *Child Abuse and Neglect* 18: 23–33.

Heighway, S. M., S. Kidd-Webster, and P. Snodgrass. 1988. "Supporting Parents with Mental Retardation." *Children Today* (November/December): 24–27.

Kantrowitz, B., P. King, and D. Witherspoon. 1986. "Help for Retarded Parents." *Newsweek* (June 23): 62 .

Klein, B. C. 1990. "Survival Dilemmas: Case Study of an Adult Child of a Schizophrenic Parent." *Clinical Social Work Journal* 18: 43–56.

Peterson, S. L., E. A. Robinson, and I. Littman. 1983. "Parent-Child Interaction Training for Parents with a History of Mental Retardation." *Applied Research in Mental Retardation* 4: 329–342.

Robinson, L. H. 1978. "Parental Attitudes of Mentally Retarded Young Mothers." *Child Psychiatry and Human Development* 8: 131–144.

Ronai, C. R. 1995. "Multiple Reflections of Child Sex Abuse: An Argument for a Layered Account." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 23: 395–426.

Ronai, C. R. 1992. "A Night in the Life of a Dancer/Researcher: A Layered Account." In *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience*, edited by Carolyn Ellis and Michael Flaherty. (Newbury Park, CA: Sage): 102–124.

Stoneman, Z. 1989. "Comparison Groups in Research on Families with Mentally Retarded Members: A Methodological and Conceptual Review." *American Journal on Mental Retardation* 94: 195–215.

Tymchuk, A. J. 1992. "Predicting Adequacy of Parenting by People with Mental Retardation." *Child Abuse and Neglect* 16: 165–178.

Tymchuk, A. J. 1991. "Self-Concepts of Mothers Who Show Mental Retardation." *Psychological Reports* 68: 503–510.

Whitman, B. Y., B. Graves, and P. J. Accardo. 1989. "Training in Parenting Skills for Adults with Mental Retardation." *Social Work* (September) 431–434.

Carol Rambo Ronai is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Memphis. As she gazes over a stack of manuscripts waiting to be edited for her forthcoming edited collection, *Everyday Sexism: Gender Oppression in the Late 20th Century* from Routledge Press with coeditors Barbara Zsembik and Joe Feagin, Carol finds herself grateful to have a healthy baby, a good relationship, and a terrific job.

I am grateful for the assistance of Rabecca Cross, David Karp, Tiffany Parish, and Jack Ronai in the preparation of this manuscript.