

CHRIS SCARLETT

11. SISTERS, SECRETS AND SILENCE

Miller (1987) tells us that “every childhood’s traumatic experiences remain hidden and locked in darkness, and the key to our understanding of the life that follows is hidden away with them” (p. 5). This key was given to me at the time of a traumatic incident that involved myself, my sister and our father, but I was slow to understand what had been placed in my hands at the time. It was only after another thirteen years and a last and final traumatic incident between myself and my sister that I recognised what had lain within my grasp for a long while. This time I was able to turn the key. So the narrative that follows, drawn from my doctoral research, is evidence of some transformative learning on my part and also of my changing subjectivity. I hope that “[it] brings together through language, the two discordant epistemologies; experience, the material and the emotional on the one hand; subjectivity, discourse and narrative on the other” (Mauthner, 2002, p. 191). But it is something more fundamental to me as well. It feels like one woman’s transcendence, a small quiet victory over the mighty weight of patriarchy. And that is because one reading of this narrative is that my father shaped my own and sister’s stories; more, he shaped our relationship from start to finish. Or at least that would be true if I had not embarked on a search for my sister, for my sistering relationship. As Foucault’s (1980) work demonstrates, there is a vital connection between knowledge and power. And what occurred to me was that the unfolding story was not just about my sister and me but part of a wider narrative, of families, female relationships and a particular familial connection named ‘sisters.’ So yes, it is a personal story, a private relationship buried deep within the closed circle of our family group. But it is also a story of two females situated in a particular society at a specific period in history, one that we share with innumerable women who are also sisters. I was excited when this dawned on me. From out of the pain of my own sistering story I could perhaps speak to others, help to make some connections, provide a narrative that could stimulate reflection and discussion and argument and challenge. So what I want to do is to make the vital connection between a private issue and public concerns, between individual agency and social institutions, between biography and history, between the story of two sisters and the nexus of patriarchy, social class and gendered subjectivities which enmeshed us. I hope to demonstrate in some small way a ‘sociological imagination’ (Mills, 1959) through the performance of a fictionalised autoethnographic narrative inquiry.

Our sistering relationship played out over five decades in post-war twentieth century England. We were born into a working class family in a northern industrial

CHRIS SCARLETT

city, our father a blacksmith, our mother a factory worker. We transcended our class origins by way of the 1944 Education Act, a good girls' grammar school, and in my case the explosion of higher education opportunities in the 1960s, to arrive at some version of a middle class professional life. We both entered the teaching profession, both married and divorced, both remarried, and had a son and a daughter each along the way. Both of us were politically active, defining ourselves as socialist feminists, powerfully shaped by the cultural zeitgeist of the times. We were viewed as close, supportive sisters by our common friends and social networks. We shared the same values, dressed alike according to the feminist canon and our near identical houses were furnished from the same Habitat/stripped pine Identikit catalogue. These are the structural, dry, sociological bones. The soft fleshy tissue tells a different story, purpled by the bruising, brutalising presence of our father, and the quiet despairing acquiescence of our depressive mother. Our mother's telling works in counterpoint to the Bluebeard figure of our father. It was our mother who abdicated her maternal role to my sister, making of her a 'minimother' to an extent unusual even in those days. I was entirely delivered up into my sister's care, which she discharged with a grim conscientiousness, swinging alarmingly from mothering to malice in a moment. She took charge of me, looked after me, cared for me, bullied me, crushed me with her hostility and rage. She was my malevolent protector, my vindictive carer. I was confused. I needed her but feared her. I both wanted her to be there for me and dreaded her appearances. We were locked into a disabling, ambivalent, destructive sistering bond from the start, and despite our educational and professional prowess, our feminist espousal of solidarity and 'sisterhood' we seemed powerless to free ourselves from the reach of our shared childhood, to transcend that narrative and story a different one together.

My sister kept a secret for thirty six years. Spilled in a single moment of crisis and desolation, it held the key to a lifetime's sistering relationship. Secrets carry within them their own retribution. My sister and I both learn this over our lifetimes. But secrets, if ever spilt, can also bring about transformations.

FRAGMENT (1)

The year is 1949, the place a reservoir carved from flooded Pennine valleys, and surrounded by millstone moorland, undisturbed, silent, beautiful in its sombre way, lonely. One can drive upon the snaking road, or tramp the moor beside it, and see no one at all.

But today is different. We are only minutes away from understanding how different this day will be.

For here comes a black Austin car approaching the reservoir from the east. We may assume that a privately owned car in this year of 1949 would belong to a man of means, belonging to the middle class, a vet perhaps visiting the outlying farms. This driver does not fit with those assumptions. He is a big, strongly-made man, around forty years in age. His still handsome face is calm, he appears content. His bright intelligent eyes glance appreciatively at the surrounding landscape. But

something about his body, his hold on the steering wheel that suggests this man is from a labouring background.

Yes. It is the hands. Massive, hard-muscled, scarred, with broken skin and ragged unclean nails, these hands rest lightly on the steering wheel. Such hands have seen decades of hard physical work and, given some knowledge about the city from which the car has journeyed, we can surmise that this man has spent some time in that city's steelworks. And indeed this is so, or rather, in the forge, a place marked out by this man and others in that city as a workplace set apart by the historic nature of its task and by the apprenticed skill of its blacksmiths. The forge required men whose fathers and grandfathers have done their time in the infernal crucible, who apprenticed their young sons and oversaw their work; who were capable of building muscle and brute strength and who could last out a shift, a working life, in the brutal heat, the liquefying blaze of the forge.

But for the moment this man has time to stop and enjoy the surrounding beauty, a landscape he has loved since a boy, cycling through its villages and valleys, just his dog loping along beside him. He knew this valley before it was flooded, has cycled many a time through the village now lying at the bottom of this dam.

By the end of this day something else may also lie there, undetected, unsuspected for decades to come.

He glances at the small girl sitting quietly on the rear seat of the car. A feeling of disquiet niggles away at his present tranquillity. His wife does not seem able to cope with what seem to him the perfectly normal tasks of looking after babies, small children. What other women appear to take in their stride his wife struggles with. She is depressed of course and he is out of his depth but still for this moment in the marriage trying to understand, to help, as he can. That is why the eldest daughter is with him now. The birth of the second child, another girl and thus a serious disappointment, has created extra strain at home. It is not the baby that is proving difficult so much as the eldest child's reaction to her arrival and his wife's inability to manage the two of them together. So, he does what he can and sometimes takes the eldest child with him to give his wife a break. She is good enough, this eldest daughter, a quiet, watchful little thing, no trouble to him. Why she has taken the second child's arrival so hard is a mystery to him but not one he is inclined to waste any time thinking over. She must learn to get on with it, he won't have a spoiled brat in his house. It does not occur to him, now, or at any time for the rest of his long life—this man will live to see a century and beyond—that his wife's first attempts at uncertain mothering have made for an insecure and anxious little girl, struggling to find the secure attachment, the longed-for bond.

And what of this child, the first daughter of this mismatched couple? Now a sister, a big sister, she is told, viewing the baby for the first time that awful morning. A morning she has not forgotten, nor will she for the rest of her life. A story will be made of it, and told to her sister's friends within the first hours of acquaintance. Told with all the anguish and rage of the two year old she was, the two year old she still is during the telling of this monstrous injustice, this primal wounding.

CHRIS SCARLETT

Collected from an obliging neighbour, she resists going home. No, she says, want to stay here. Don't want to see baby sister. And indeed, why would she? But the father is not in any mind to see the child's point of view. He will not be disobeyed by a child of his. Swooping down, he picks her up, and stills her struggles by a hard and prolonged slapping from those massive muscled hands. Beating her all the way home, he carries her into the house and deposits her in the bedroom, by the baby's crib. Shaken, in considerable pain, furious, she stares down at the cause of her grief, the reason for her smarting body, and knows in all her small being that this baby is the cause of her unhappiness and it is here to stay and she is desolate.

Today she sits quietly on the back seat of the car swinging her legs and in her heart knows the truth about this car trip. She has been banished so that her mother can spend the whole day with her little sister. Furious, sad, she appears unconcerned, looking at the scenery, monitoring her father, keeping a safe distance.

This will change in a very short time now.

Her father stops the car at the edge of the reservoir and hauls out the primus stove, heats a pan of milk. Sipping their drinks the father scans the landscape and bringing his gaze closer to the dam, he thinks he sees something move, low down in the heather, near the water line. A sheep lying down, in trouble? No, a farm dog perhaps, trapped, broken a leg? His attention focused now, he stares intently and then, no, it can't be ..., surely not? Not here of all places? Then his body stiffens, and the neck muscles are taut with barely suppressed anger. The child senses the change, looks first inquiringly and then fearfully at her father. Something is wrong. What is it? Has she done something bad? No, her father's gaze is trained on something outside the car, not on her.

Suddenly her father's body snaps up. He is shouting instructions at her.

"Get down, get down, get between the seats. Stay there. Don't move. Stay there until I tell you to move. And don't look. Do you hear me? Don't look. I'll give you a hiding if you look through the window. Get down now."

And with that he is gone, and the child is crouching down in the gap between the seats. All her life she will remember the particular smell of the carpet pressing against her nose. What has happened? Where has her father gone? When will he come back? A lifetime passes and still she stays crouching as she has been told to do. But anxiety as to where her father has gone, and an irrepressible compulsion to look, just a peep, brings her head up, inching an eye above the windowsill.

An incomprehensible scene plays out before her horrified stare. Her father is grappling with a man, fighting, punching his weight, the other man is flailing. A few feet away a woman is starting to scream, no, no, stop it, stop it, oh ... Her father is easily the bigger, the stronger of the two. She sees her father's raised fist, the smash down, the crumpling shape. Now she sees her father kicking the inert body. On and on, oh, she can't bear it, ducks down, trembling with the horror of it, comes up again to see a changed scene. The woman is gone, nowhere to be seen and her father is now dragging a large dark shape to the edge of the reservoir. She is paralysed. She sees the dark water, she feels it closing over her head, she is choking, suffocating, drowning ...

She comes round lying on the bottom of the car floor and then her father is there again, slumped in the driving seat. Slowly his body quietens and he straightens himself, pulls his body up into a driving position and takes hold of the wheel.

Her father's massive, knuckled hands gripping the wheel are covered in blood. She cannot take her eyes away, she is transfixed with terror. The fight, the lifeless body, the black water ... she opens her mouth but no sound comes. She is left possessed by a terrible knowledge. Her father has killed a man. The idea, once thought, takes root, becomes over the years of her life an unquestioned, unshakeable, unchallenged absolute. And she feels with grim intuition that she will always carry this dreadful secret. Aged just four this dread knowledge enters her soul forever more. She will live her life burdened by this awful act. Yes, here is her father, telling her now that she must not talk about this, ever, to no one, no one at all.

And as the car pulls away driven by a man armoured by his righteousness, and she sits shaking uncontrollably on her seat, it comes to her with an overwhelming force, a rage, that if she had been at home this day, then she would have known nothing of this. Staring at her father's bloody hands on the wheel, she thinks of her little sister. That is why she is shaking, shaking, as the car accelerates away and the dark stillness of the dam causes her to turn away with a barely stifled scream.

And so this day the die is cast.

Between daughter and father certainly, but also between two sisters. What has up to this moment been an unfortunate introduction between the sisters, a natural sibling rivalry intensified by uncertain mothering, becomes transformed into something else.

One sister burdened now with a terrible secret, an unspeakable terror she takes with her through every lifelong day, and one sister burdened with being the cause of it.

FRAGMENT (2)

Winter now, winter everywhere. Ice and tiredness. This cannot go on. Mum is still putting up her doomed fight against the massive brain tumour laying her mind and body waste and we are nursing her through the nights now, taking turns. At least that is the theory. But Dad simply can't manage it, and not surprising either. He's seventy eight and worn out too in his own way. Several times now either my sister Jean or I have arrived in the morning to find Dad in bed asleep and Mum in a wet bed. We do have options. I contacted the Macmillan nursing team ages ago and they have repeatedly offered night nursing support.

We have broached the night nurse option with Dad several times but he is at his most difficult, most obnoxious.

"I'm not letting strangers into me 'ouse at night, yer can think agin. Wandering round, nosying in drawers, stealing whatever they can find. We'll manage."

CHRIS SCARLETT

But we're not managing, not any more. Jean and I are stretched beyond ourselves as it is, we can't take over Dad's nights on top of our own. But this is of course what Dad wants us to do and thinks if he holds out long enough, leaves Mum in wet beds enough times, we'll do it.

But today is different. Today is when I say to Dad that we have to deal with the night nursing situation. I shall have to be the one to say it of course. Historically this is how it has always been. Jean will be behind me physically as well as metaphorically.

Dad's face shuts down. The mulish look is there, the jaw out, the head lowered. Jean and I exchange a weary look.

I go through the arguments yet again. We must now start to use the Night Nursing Service.

He is instantly furious.

"I've told yer, I've told yer 'til I'm blue in t'face. I will not have them women in my 'ouse."

I am calm at this moment. My mind is made up.

"I'm afraid you don't have a choice any longer about this Dad. Jean and I are agreed on this."

"Yer'll do as yer told! Yer the daughters, you'll do as yer told!"

His temper thoroughly lost now, he raises his voice and Jean instinctively steps smartly back from him.

"No, Dad, I say, mustering all my reserves, it doesn't work like that now."

"By 'eck, it does, he snarls in my face. Yer don't dictate what 'appens in my 'ouse, lass. I do. Allus did, allus will do. Yer'll do as you're told. I'm yer father, yer'll do as I say. I'm yer father, do you 'ear me?"

And now I am somewhere else. I have reached my limit. No, am beyond it. I look at him directly now as I say to him what he has coming, has had coming for a lifetime.

"I know you're my father, and no-one regrets it more than I do."

Then the world explodes. I am off my feet as his blow lifts me and I slam against the kitchen wall before crumpling down onto the floor. I know what is coming now. I instinctively roll into a foetal curl and cover my head with my arms. I can't manoeuvre to get away from him, the space is too small and I am boxed into a corner by him. He has me and he knows it. The kicking starts, aimed with calculated deliberation at my head, his heavy shoes finding their target. I am in trouble. I can't protect my head as I need to. I know he isn't going to stop.

But he does. I hear a strangled noise and I uncurl and look up to see what is happening. I can't take it in. Jean is trying to pull Dad off me. She is screaming at him, something I can't hear properly, don't understand, something about knowing something about him, something she'll go to the police about *now* if he doesn't stop this minute. And he does stop. Instantly. I look up into his face and what I see is a frightened man. I still don't understand what has happened to make him back off but it is clear enough to me that something about Jean's words are

powerful enough to control this man, to strike a terror in him now etched on his face.

And then Peter, Jean's husband, is through the door. He looks aghast, takes it in with a fast appraising glance and acts swiftly. Pulling Jean off Dad, he locks down his father-in-law with an iron grip.

"You bastard," he says tightly. "You ever touch Susan or Jean again, and so help me, as old as you are I'll beat the living daylights out of you."

Dad slumps defeated and slinks out of the door. I pull myself up into a chair and dust myself down. We can hear Mum's voice, a wavering cry from the sitting room. Peter stands looking from Jean to me.

"Go on," I say, "go to Mum, we'll sort ourselves out."

I look at Jean. She is ashen and visibly shaking. Then I realise she is shaking not from fear but from rage. She is beside herself with rage, a towering, incandescent rage I cannot remember ever seeing before.

"Stay there Sue," she whispers. "I'll get something to wipe you up." I haven't noticed that I am bleeding.

And as she crouches by me dabbing away she tells me a story.

FRAGMENT (3)

Her hospital bed, high, high up on the hill, gives a fairy tale panorama of twinkling lights across the city. But the light in my mother has been extinguished. I lay my head on my mother's body and howl.

"Don't," says my sister sharply. "Don't. Don't do that."

* * *

Rogers (2006) tells us that silence as well as language plays its part in the construction of relationships. I find this to be true. The ensuing silence has been a gift. I have been given a clear quietness in which to reflect on my sistering relationship, a space that I have filled with writing, study, research. And I have learnt that sistering is both an intimate personal tie *and* a social relationship and that our gendered subjectivities were shaped in the crucible of our sistering role; that power relations between sisters mirror those of the wider world—domination and defiance, superior reach and subjugation. I have recognised that economic dependence as well as depression rendered our mother powerless and that our working class roots resonated differently with us and between us as our educational trajectories propelled us across a class divide.

In short, as Rushdie (1981, p. 370) puts it:

I repeat for the last time; to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world.

REFERENCES

- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge*. Brighton: Harvester.
 Mauthner, M. (2002). *Sistering: Power and change in female relationships*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

CHRIS SCARLETT

- Miller, A. (1987). *The drama of being a child: The search for the true self*. London: Virago Press.
Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Rogers, A. (2006). *The unsayable: The hidden language of trauma*. New York: Random House.
Rushdie, S. (1981). *Midnight's children*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Christine Scarlett
Graduate School of Education
University of Bristol