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Tell Tale Interviews: Lessons in True-Life Trauma Narratives Gleaned from Jennifer Fox's *The Tale*

A beautiful woman in a polka dot bikini is framed by the camera's viewfinder when she becomes aware of a presence behind her. She is strikingly good-looking, high-cheek bones, blond hair cropped short and combed behind the ears, blue eyes slanted inquisitively, mouth curved into the puckered hint of a smile. Behind her, a fountain gurgles as it empties into an inviting pool. The woman squints, mouth curled in curiosity, and turns to fully face the camera, revealing the lit cigarette she holds in hand.

"Who are you?" she demands in a distinguished British accent. The curl of her lips reveals a faint amusement, a curiosity so mild it threatens to wilt into ennui.

"Jennifer?"

The voice behind the camera belongs to a middle-aged woman, but it sounds small and tentative, timid like the plea of a child.

The British woman juts out her chin. "Who?"

"Jenny," the voice offers. "The girl over there, arriving at your house."

The woman looks up. A car winds up a long driveway, tires crunching gravel. Off screen, the British woman's voice turns authoritative: "Oh, you're Jenny. You've come to spend the summer."

The car comes to a stop. Through the passenger-side window, we glimpse a smiling teenage girl. Is she fifteen? Sixteen? She's tall, pretty, with freckles on her nose making her look both smart and goofy.

"So, you remember me?"

"Of course, I remember you. You've had a few lessons."

"Am I talented? Am I a good rider?"

"No, I wouldn't say so. Not a natural. Your family's rich, though. Jews."

"Jews?" Jennifer's voice betrays a need, a hunger.

"I never met a Jew until I came to America. Jews don't ride horses. Have you ever seen a Jew competing at Brighton?" The British woman scoffs. She tilts her eyebrows, a slight shake of her head. "I supposed I'd better get on with it." (*The Tale*)

The woman then walks off camera and into a memory—or should we call it a flashback? Between one frame and the next, the bikini and lit cigarette turn into plain jeans and t-shirt. A handkerchief tied over the woman's head now hides her fashionable haircut. There is no trace of arrogance or ennui as she strides to greet the man exiting the car, a hand extended to welcome the father of the 13-year-old girl who has signed up for a summer of riding lessons. The girl is Jennifer Fox, who will, 35 years later, become the film director behind the camera, who, in a small and child-like voice, interrogates her own memories as if they were the subjects of a documentary, trying to understand her unconscionable past the best way she knows how: through her art.

The scene is from Jennifer Fox's *The Tale,* a dramatization of the director's real life experience with sexual abuse at the hand of two adults she trusted when she was thirteen, her riding coach and her personal trainer. The film closely adheres to the facts of her experience in all but the climactic confrontation at the close of the film between herself and her abuser. The situations and conversations are, according to Fox, mostly authentic, though at times she would fill in some dialogue with what she came to believe the people in her life were actually thinking at the time.

In spite of the fact that the film is what Fox calls "a fictional" memoir, or, how some critics prefer to call it, a dramatized memoir, *The Tale* successfully exposes concealed truths about the nature of abuse and the slippery psychology behind both predator and prey with methods that reflect the writer/director's decades-long work with documentary film and nonfiction writing. Relentless in its interrogation of

memory, exposing every false perception against the facts—photos, diary entries, interviews with the people who experienced that childhood event with her —*The Tale* is less a story about the evil of sexual abuse then it is a study on perception and identity, on a survivor's nearly endless talent for self-deception, and on the webs of complicity that can easily spin between prey, predator, and everyone in between—teachers, parents, etc.—to trap even a well-adjusted young girl from a solid family into an abusive situation.

While there are many cringe-worthy moments, including a sexual initiation scene that Fox insisted had to be included so as to show just "how grotesque [child sex] is," (Galuppo) there are many more disturbing moments wherein no one is naked, no one is even touching at all. Watching two grown adults who parade themselves as teachers and guides beguile and rope-in a child too inexperienced to see through their manipulations is as disturbing as watching a fabricated scene in which a prepubescent actress is pretending to have sex with a middle-aged man. But what separates this memoir dramatization from other narratives on the subject is that for most of her life, Fox believed that her relationship to her abusers was a formative romance, a "thing so beautiful" as she describes in a story about it that she wrote in high school. Both in real life and in the film, it was that same short story that Jennifer's mother discovered hidden in an attic 35 years later that catalyzed the now 48-year old unmarried woman to take her journey to the core of a harsh truth.

If the subject of child sexual abuse is abundant and familiar to both fiction and memoir (think the recently released *Twisted: The Story of Larry Nassar and the Women who Took Him Down*, or Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss*) the methods through which *The Tale* navigates the dark mazes of memory, fact, and intuition breaks new ground in narratology. Jennifer Fox's narrative techniques may open the door for new approaches to prose trauma narratives, introducing a complex and nuanced method for expressing what women have attempted to define for themselves and for society for at least two centuries, sometimes with little success: that consent or lack thereof is not a simple matter of yes or no, and that the abuse and

oppression that is not visible to the eye, the abuse that happens not through force, but through manipulation, can be just as painful and devastating as overtly violent forms.

While Jennifer Fox may not be the first writer to suggest that consent in sexual acts is a slippery concept, and that memory and perception are fallible, particularly when shock or trauma is involved, what *The Tale* does differently is that, as it investigates the events leading to the abuse, the narrator gives equal weight to memory, imagination, and fact by personifying memory and perception and engaging with them in the same way she engages with real-life witnesses. How Fox manages to illustrate lucidly the dark mazes of a trauma survivor's psychology is a brilliant feat of meta-fictive drama accomplished by shifting smoothly from scenes in the present, to imaginary interviews she holds with the subjects of her memories, to more or less factual flashbacks of the past, recast, revised, and at times repeated, in *Liar's Club* style, when new information surfaces. The method is effective on multiple layers, as it invites the audience to reconsider the role that both personal and societal perception play on abuse, even in situations where most conscientious adults would agree, such abuse could have been easily prevented. It also brings attention to how abuse can be far more complex a mechanism than is often assumed.

Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club*, though not strictly a memoir about sexual abuse, is nonetheless an illustrative example of how a writer's narrative strategies lend richness and texture to an otherwise violent and disturbing story about neglect and abuse. Karr's memoir was groundbreaking in how it handled the immediacy of trauma memory and its flash intrusions into a trauma victim's consciousness. Karr accomplished this by interrupting her traditional past-tense narration with sections of fragmented narratives rich with sensory details and written in the present tense. These shifts are reserved for the most dramatic incident of the narrator's life: when her mother had her first neurotic breakdown; when she was sexually violated by a babysitter; when she had to throw herself on her stepfather so that her mother would not shoot him down, and so forth.

The first of these emotionally charged events is mentioned on the very first page of the memoir, and enters the narrative as one imagines it does the narrator's consciousness: with vivid lucidity, without context, with no prelude or conclusion—a floating memory of a past that's been amputated at both ends. Karr spends the first of three sections of the memoir reconstructing the events that led to that moment. She then revisits the narrative with even more details when Karr is finally able to contextualize it, roughly in the middle of the memoir. Karr's style successfully echoes that haunting re-experiencing of a traumatic event that PTSD sufferers endure, and her disarming admission to readers that as a child experiencing an event of great magnitude, she does not know and may never know all the answers was also fresh at the time of its publication, and is what distinguishes her work from others on the same subject.

In context with true narratives about the murkiness of sexual abuse, it is fair to note that many in nonfiction have also shone the light on the self-destructive practices young women engage in when their maturing minds do not keep pace with their maturing bodies. *Loose Girl,* by Kerry Cohen, is one such example. Early in the memoir, the narrator, who finds herself stranded in New York city at age 14 with three of her friends, unable to get home, ends up in the front seat of a stranger's car, her three friends in the back, as he begins to touch her inappropriately. In her narrative, Cohen is disarmingly honest about the confusing play of emotions that the man's uninvited advances have on her.

> I clench my body, my eyes turned to the window. I want to scream, to push his hand away, but I'm too afraid. Too afraid that if I won't give in, he won't let me go at all. But there's something else, too, …something I don't really want to admit: …It is my greatest hope—to be wanted. And here, with this repulsive older man, I'm getting that. He holds his hand there like he owns me, but really, silently, I'm the one who owns him. (Cohen 16)

With that same unflinching honesty, Cohen relates how, in order to feel worthy and loved, mistaking the elusive social cues of her peers, she falls into a demeaning self-destructive cycle of sexual promiscuity that always inevitably leads to personal humiliation, and sometimes, to far worse things. In one telling scene, a

boyfriend of one of Cohen's close friends sneaks into her room while she is asleep. Cohen wakes up when he is on top of her, and unsuccessfully fights back. She has the ability to scream but cannot bring herself to do it, prevented by some sense of shame she cannot overcome. "It doesn't matter. Why does it matter? It's just one more guy. Just get through it. All you have to do is get through it." (Cohen 100) She finds the act of having unwanted sex with a stranger so familiar that she cannot even bring herself to call it rape or to discuss it with anyone afterwards, in spite of the violence of it. "I don't tell anyone for many, many years. As far as I know, there's nothing to tell. I had sex again. This time, with Jennifer's boyfriend" (Cohen 100).

A strong example of Fox's unusual narrative technique occurs early in the film. When the adult Jennifer Fox (played by Laura Dern) first reads the short story that her mother found while reorganizing her house, Fox slips into a memory about her first meeting with Billy (Jason Ritter) and Mrs. G. (Elizabeth Debiki), who are the architects of her abuse. However, at this point in the narrative, the filmmaker still remembers them both with fondness. In this flashback sequence, the younger Jennifer is cast as a shy and awkward but a fully developed young adult in actress Jessica Sarah Flaum. Flaum is tall, pretty, with an intelligent expression that charmingly clashes with the awkwardness of her tentative body movements so typical of a young, maturing teen. This is how the older Jennifer remembers herself at age 13. Flaum's physical maturity, at first blush, supports Jennifer's illusion that her romance with an older man may seem objectionable to a parent, but can be formative for a young girl who is smart-enough, precocious-enough, and independently minded enough to find an older man attractive. Her body, in other words, attenuates the inappropriateness of hers and Billy's age gap.

The illusion soon ends, however. Jennifer's mother points out that the picture she's holding is one she took when she was older. She then unearths another picture, one of Jennifer at age 13, played by the prepubescent Isabelle Nelisse, a petite girl, her face round and pudgy, her expression intelligent, but

unmistakably child-like. The adult Jennifer then revisits the same memory. Scenes from the sequence of Jennifer's first encounter with Mrs. G. and Billy replay, this time with a flat-chested, boyish-looking child in the lead. Billy and Mrs. G. retain the same secret smiles, the same benevolent expressions they bestowed on Jennifer in the first sequence, but with Nelisse as the focus of their attention, their every glance and gesture feel conspiratorial and nefarious. Yet, in both sequences, Jennifer is still that same shy, smart-for-her-age young girl, still easily infatuated by the idyllic setting and the beauty of her hosts, and most importantly, still 13—but any thoughtful viewer will have to re-examine and reconsider why the first sequence did not bring on quite as much shock, when clearly, it should have.

The switch in casting is an elegant method to expose the false assumptions associated with a girl's sexual maturity, but it also addresses the disparity between how we perceive ourselves and how we project ourselves to the outside world. The plasticity of perception is a recurring theme in *The Tale*, this dance between what we think we are and what we really are, and what we think we remember and what actually happened. *The Tale* observes the simultaneous validity of contradictory narratives, how they web and weave in the course of a lifetime to construct this elusory thing we call the self. *The Tale* is, as Laura Dern explains in the film to a class of journalism students, about the stories we all tell ourselves to survive. To develop such a complex theme while also treating the taboo matter of child sexual abuse, Jennifer employs a series of interesting narrative moves hinging on what is most fundamental to her in her work: interviews.

In the film, once the adult Jennifer has discovered that who she remembers herself as being is probably not who she actually was, she decides to re-examine her past the way a documentary filmmaker would: through research and interviews. "How do people change," Fox's alter-ego thinks out loud on film. "When I was a kid, I wanted to change myself all the time. Now I don't even know how I got here" (*The Tale*).

We are different people as we move through time. Even our bodies, the most tangible aspect of our presence in this world, shed and replace every last cell every seven years. Our memories, fallible and

unreliable as they are, remain for a time, creating that illusion of continuance that we associate with the self, but what are we if not a collection of fragmented and mostly fabricated images arranged and rearranged in convenient collages to tell that every-changing story of "self" that we cling to as proof of our individual existence? Why should we not interview our earlier "selves" to get to not just the truth of our stories, but also to the lie of it? Why not summon that collection of beliefs and delusions that in earlier times filtered our experiences through different angles then the ones we carry in the present?

It is interesting to note that when Fox first attempted a draft of the script, she wrote it as a linear narrative that focused on the events as they occurred. When she re-read it sometime later, however, she was turned off by the tone-deaf banality of the message that sexual abuse is horrific. What interested her was not so much the devastation that her association with Billy caused her later in life, but how she did not, could not remember who she was at thirteen. Was she a victim? Then why did she, for so many decades, continue to believe of that summer and those people as something beautiful and so important?

In interviews, Fox sometimes lacks the words to express what sex with Billy was to her—certainly, abusive, certainly, life-damaging, but in an NPR interview Fox explained that she cannot call herself a victim. Rather, she calls herself a survivor, ascribing her own long-lived denial of the true nature of that first sexual encounter as part of the mechanism that enabled her to continue on with life. For her, *The Tale* was all about the narratives that the mind creates for itself; it was about exploring that fragile and elusive thing called the "self" and the stories it spins. And that is what she wanted to write about: that paradoxical notion of identity, that idea of a "self" as a self-contained entity proving to be just an illusion.

When Fox approached the script for the second time, it was a far less conscious process. She wrote down snippets of memories as they came to her, as fragments, as parts of conversations which she read in diaries and later recalled, and questions that arose as her mind began to associate what she found with other memories. So began the creative process that led to *The Tale.*:

> Finding and talking to people are, of course, real documentary skills, like creating a rapport, making people feel comfortable, and all of those things. But my skills were not so great as to ever get the realness, to share the real deal, to talk directly [with the people who did this to me] about what had happened. That's where I had to use my fiction tropes of fantasy, i.e. "Well, what would they say if they would answer my question?" I began to imagine imaginary interviews with them and I did the same for my child self because I realized that I really no longer understood why *she* did what she did, and of course, there's nobody to ask. I began to imagine how that would be." (NoFilm School)

In *The Tale*, Fox sifts through layers of identity by allowing different versions of herself and other people to have a voice in the story. As her film's alter ego flashes back to the night that Mrs. G. first left her alone with Billy, we revisit the moment young Jenny took the fateful decision to begin her sexual relationship with him. It's late, and while Mrs. G., Billy, and Jenny have been discussing Jenny's lack of trust in her parents in Billy's living room, Mrs. G. realizes that time has slipped by and that she has to take herself and Jenny home. Billy proposes that Jenny spend the night in his old son's room instead.

"Well, it's not up to me," Mrs. G. replies, holding Jennifer's pudgy face in her hands. "Jennifer can make her own mind up. Can't you?"

The camera swiftly shifts to adult Jennifer, her inner voice asking, "What did I say? I don't remember." She searches through her papers, and scans that short story she wrote so long ago. The camera drifts back to young Jenny, washing her hands in Billy's bathroom.

"Why would you do that?" adult Jennifer's voice asks.

Young Jennifer stares into the mirror, shrugs, says, "Well, it's my life. I can make my own decisions."

"Really? You think so?" adult Jennifer challenges her, still invisible, still only a voice. "So, what did you say?"

"Well, I said yes because I want to prove to Billy and Mrs. G. that I'm mature."

"But that's not what you wrote. You wrote that you don't want to be here. That you want to go back with Mrs. G. to her house. Look in your notebook. It's right there."

The camera pans to Jenny's canvas school bag, the edge of a notebook slipping out.

"That's just a fiction story," Jenny says.

We glimpse adult Jennifer through the bathroom mirror, now a presence in her own imagination. "What do you mean just fiction," she argues. "We wrote this as–"

"It's just a version of what happened," young Jenny speaks over her.

"What does that mean?"

"A lot of it is true," Jenny says. "My teacher says all stories are based on the writer's life."

"You don't know what's about to happen," says adult Jennifer.

"Stop!" Jenny shouts. "You've become just like all of them. You just want to tell me what to do. It's my life. Mine. Not yours. Let me live!" (*The Tale)*

From that scene on, Fox imagines interviewing her 13-year old self every time more details of the relationship emerge. She also mentally interviews Billy and Mrs. G., not as they are now, or as she imagines they might be now, but as they were at the time the abuse occurred. Through those snippets, Fox is able to work out more insights into Billy's mindset, and Mrs. G., the woman who facilitated their relationship, lying to Jenny's parents, and providing a front for Billy.

These imagined interviews effectively give voice to the questions that trouble the older Jennifer, allowing her to reclaim her voice in the unknowable aspects of her abuse. What she cannot answer straight out through her notes, letters, and journals, what she cannot ask directly through her interviews with the real-life people (because Fox was afraid that mentioning the abuse straight out would scare Billy into suing her and prevent her from producing the film) Jennifer answers by interrogating the memories themselves —a brilliant method for the writer/director to convey her own take on what was going through their

minds. But is it fictional? Or is it not still part of the exploration of that elusive thing we call our consciousness that legitimizes the device as a nonfiction technique? The interviews highlight the gap between an older woman's perceptions and a young adult's gut-instincts. The 13-year-old Jennifer processes the details of that inconceivable situation through wildly romantic filters, while the older Jennifer is able to cut to the harsh truth of these events without varnish, even if they happened more than thirty years earlier.

"I know Mrs. G. better than I know Billy, but he would never hurt me," says Jenny in Billy's bathroom, moments before her sexual initiation.

"What if you're wrong?" asks adult Jennifer, her voice echoing ominously as the camera shifts back to her New York loft.

Once adult Jennifer tracks down and is able to meet with the real Billy and Mrs. G., the imaginary interviews serve to set up the amazing contrast between Jennifer's intuition and perception and the stone fronts that her abusers put up against her questions. Where the imagined subjects are earnest and forthcoming, the real adults are evasive and manipulative. The young Billy of Jennifer's imagination explains his attraction to the 13-year old Jennifer as a desire for freshness, for an earnest, trusting kind of love that he cannot find in cynical, jaded adults. However, the older, real-life William refuses to answer adult Jennifer's phone calls and hides behind predictable denials and evasions.

Similarly, the imaginary Mrs. G. is unrepentant and unapologetic, but she at least confesses that she wanted to keep alive Billy's sexual interested in her. The older Mrs. G., on the other hand, is hardly forthcoming. She hijacks the conversation towards her sad upbringing, the recent loss of her son, and her husband's terminal cancer, steering Jennifer away from the subject, clinging control over the narrative. Ironically, Mrs. G's tactics, which would have worked on the 13-year-old Jennifer, are what make the older Jennifer realize that her memories have betrayed her. Confronted with the selfish, self-centered Mrs. G.,

Jennifer has to acknowledge that what she remembered as a mentorship was, in fact, something far more sinister.

Memoirists have for a long time braided their awareness of memory's fallibility into prose, exposing their recollections to rigorous investigation and handling the uncertainties with varying degrees of mistrust and caution. Tara Westover offers a masterful example with *Educated*. Retelling the story of how she escaped the oppressive psychological oppression and physical abuse of her survivalist family, the narrator never loses sight of the possibility that her own emotions may have tainted some of what she remembers of the physical and emotional abuse she endured. She meticulously buttresses her retelling of key event filling in her gaps with email excerpts, journal entries, conversation with witnesses, and lucid reasoning, careful to alert the reader when her own memory of an event differs with that of a family member or acquaintance, and reporting both versions in pursuit of clarity and fairness. There is undeniable merit to this method. What emerges is an authoritative and richly textured memoir that reveals the complexities of love and family relationships, placing focus on the destructive consequences of untreated mental conditions rather than on the violence of her abusers.

But there is all the same something deeply innovative and resonant about how Fox handles that obsessive visitation of the past and the mercurial nature of memory in *The Tale*. With *Educated*, the reader is never confused about what aspect of the narrative Westover is not sure she recollects clearly and what aspect is certain and well documented. Even Karr, in her retelling of the most traumatic event of her life in *The Liars' Club*, admits upfront to the reader that she does not know the truth, only fragments of it as she remembers them, thus drawing a hard line between the experiences themselves, of which she has a clear, lucid memory, and what lead to each as she can best make out. Such admissions, honest as they are, may be problematic for some readers.

"The job of single memoirist can be daunting," wrote Sheyla Ballantine, a *New York Times* reviewer, of Karr's memoir. "There are moments when one almost wishes for some fictional shaping in the service of a truth larger, and more potent, than the literal one. It would have helped in those early scenes that focus on her mother and father if she had stepped aside and allowed some imaginative flashes of possibilities to fill those blanks that a young child can't know. One longs for some scrap of remembered dialogue, some interaction, as we anxiously wait to get to know these parents, this quiet sister, this courageous narrator. Even imagined dialogue would have provided some relief from the relentless and often lonely task Ms. Karr has set herself" (Ballantine).

Frequently, fiction writers recommend interviewing characters as a way to deepen their understanding of the fictitious; Fox's work suggests that nonfiction writing might also concern itself with the interrogative imagination in pursuit of truth. In metafiction, I have often read dramatized interviews and arguments between author and character as a way to raise questions about the nature of art and the role of the writer with respect to the creation of the work. In creative nonfiction, however, commitment to accuracy and loyalty to truth means that interviews are intended to preserve and confirm the facts, as well as to allow the subject of the interview to recount their experience without the author's filters and biases. Interviews, in creative nonfiction, exist, if anything, to close the gap between memory and perception, between bias and fact. *The Tale* offers us another possibility: imaginary interviews can be used to embrace subjectivity, to explore the fictitiousness of our perception, which haunt us from moment to moment, never quite completely abandoning us.

With the interviews, Jennifer Fox approaches the unknowable-ness of our past selves both as a phenomenon that needs to be scrubbed clean for clarity but also as something that, in its smoky, opaque form has a measurable informative value. From the very moment when the striking, young Mrs. G. appears on screen in her polka-dot bikini as a figment of older Jennifer's imagination, Fox unveils the first hint of

the meta-structure that will define how the narrative engages with the inextricability of fact and fantasy, with the fallacies of memory and perception, and with the unknowingness of certain aspects of child abuse.

If the young striking woman by the pool is only a memory living inside older Jennifer's mind, the audience ought to question why Jennifer imagines her as not remembering who she is. And why do such disturbing comments about Jews come so boldly out of her mouth? Does Jennifer really remember this woman fondly, or is her subconscious manifesting observations about her that had long remained suppressed? And of course, as a memory, Mrs. G. is still that striking young woman Jennifer remembers from her youth, as real to Jennifer as the older, fragile Mrs. G. she interviews later. In the realm of the mind, what one imagines or deduces is as real as what one experiences. Memory and fantasy are experiences, too. The moment, as an audience, we accept the intrusion of a thought having an independent identity from the narrator, we unknowingly enter the existential maze of identity that is in this case complicit in how the abuse unfolds.

The most effective moments of the film reflecting this technique is when adult Jennifer confronts her young self for the last time. Young Jennifer has just read her short story to her English class, assuring her teacher and classmates that it was all made up. The teacher all too-readily accepts it as a fantasy, troubled by the content, but happy enough to dismiss it as evidence of Jenny's fictive imagination and talent. As young Jennifer walks alone down the school's hallway, clutching her notebook with pride, adult Jennifer's voice confronts her:

"You lied to me. You told me it was a good thing all these years."

"And it was," says the 13-year old Jennifer, with a cat smile reminiscent of Mrs. G's ever-present grin. She pulls out her story from an envelope and adds, "I got an A."

Older Jennifer tells her that the A doesn't matter, a tone in her voice that tries to rein in her pain and disappointment, but young Jennifer shakes her head. "You want me to be some pathetic victim. Well,

you know what? I'm not. I've got something no one else does. I'm the teacher now. Not just some invisible kid." Older Jennifer warns her she will never be married or have kids—the audience has been witnessing all along how Jennifer pushes away those closest to her, how she shuts down when her fiancée tries to comfort her, how she dismisses her mother and the detective who works child abuse cases as they both try to help her.

Young Jennifer shakes her head, does not care that she will never marry or have children: "I know one thing," she says. "He loved me. He cried, didn't you see?... I'm not the victim of this story. I'm the hero. He's the one who fell apart." She speaks with a pride that epitomizes the sad delusion of her perceived victory. She was the strong one. She broke up with Billy. The proof of it is in the fact that he will continue to write her for years, she says. She tries to claim ownership of her life's narrative, but older Jennifer will not let her: "You couldn't even think that their lives might continue without you, that there would be others."

Young Jennifer lowers her head, the thought troubling her.

"You froze them in time, didn't you?" older Jennifer continues, lifting the veil from young Jenny's eyes (*The Tale*).

I am reminded of the helplessness I felt in graduate school when I argued with classmates over Nabokov's *Lolita*. I had felt uncomfortable reading about Humbert's sexual ambushes on the pre-adolescent child, but I could not get others to fully appreciate the baseness of what Humbert was doing. To many of my classmates, Lolita was a "nymphet," the term used by Humbert to describe a precocious, astute, and sexually voracious "old soul," distinctly different and far more self-aware than a normal child. Besides, they argued, it was Lolita in the end who initiate the seduction. Her sexual curiosity precluded any possibility that she may have been a victim of her own false sense of adulthood, or that she may have unwittingly become complicit in a form of abuse that would affect her for the rest of her life. To my friends, there was

no abuse. It was Humber, comical Humber, who had to be pitied because of his infatuation and obsession over a "young woman" or "nymphet" who was clearly too immature and shallow to appreciate his affections or take him seriously. I wonder that a version of Lolita written in the point of view of the title character would resemble the second sequence of the first romantic meeting in Jennifer Fox's *The Tale*.

It's not as if such a thing has not happened in real life. Girls continue to be thought of as *nymphettes* even when their bodies hardly support the fantasy of a sexual precocity. Margaux Fragoso's *Tiger, Tiger* is as close as a real-life account of a Lolita as any I know. In her memoir, Fragoso recounts how she was accosted by a pedophile at age seven, seduced not by his sexual allure, obviously, but by the adult man's ability to play with fantasy, to build illusions with words and spaces. It was his child-like qualities that drew her, that made her feel that the world he created around her was special.

> I knew he must be old, to have lines and graying hair and loose skin on his neck, but he had so much energy and brightness that he didn't seem old. He didn't even seem adult in that sense of natural separateness that adults have from children…I think he could have been aligned with a hundred men of similar build and disposition, and I could have pulled him out of that line and asked him, 'Can I play with you?' (Fragoso 17)

Fragoso's sexual relationship with the middle-aged Peter lasts until she reaches her twenties, ending only when Peter commits suicide. In their decades' long relation, Fragoso and her abuser had some eerie correlation to Nabokov's story: how Peter drew her into his life by first charming her mother, like Humber did with Lolita; how, when Fragoso began to show signs of womanhood at twelve, Peter was less attracted to her than when she was a child, just like Humber finds Lolita aged and less attractive when he meets her again at age seventeen. But even as we get this privileged glimpse of what a true-life *nymphette* really suffers, there are still gaps in the narrative: why did Fragoso allow it to go on even as an adult? It is unclear in the memoir.

Much of the criticism Fragoso received for *Tiger, Tiger*, including from sexual abuse survivors and psychologists, is that the memoir dwells too much on the details of the sex, even describing the size of Peter's penis, but not enough on how, as an adult capable to reflect on her experience, she now processes that disturbing past. Edvige Giunta, one of Fragoso's writing mentors at university, admits that there is very little reflection in the writing, but she also amends the comment by saying, "a reflective voice would have reduced the brutality. It was a literary choice" (Schudell).

It could have been a literary choice. Or it may also have been that Fragoso was unable to arrive to any clear conclusions as to why such an ineffability situation occurs. In the memoir's epilogue, Fragoso is clear about the devastation that the relationship brought on her emotional and mental state, but on the how or why she sustained it in the first place, she can offer nothing beyond the same theme we see repeating in all narratives of this type: she felt neglected at home, she sought for attention and needed love that she was not getting. So how does a writer or a filmmaker demonstrate the not-knowing of a child, when even the adult struggles with that knowledge? Like most women, I have experienced, in admittedly less traumatic forms, the manipulative overtures of older men who should have known better. I also fabricated the same self-deceiving justification to survive those moments. How to write about such moments of contradiction, self-sabotage, and obvious lack of insight? If I were to confess my own naïve failings, my own willingness to believe the lie or to go along with what I knew inside was wrong, would I be able to carry the narrative with that degree of honesty and earnestness that a creative nonfiction narrator owes the reader?

I remember, too, the suffocating frustration when *American Beauty* first screened in theaters in 1999. In the film, a 42-year old man, ironically played by the now exposed sexual predator Kevin Spacey, attempts to seduce his 17-year-old daughter's best friend, Angela (Mena Suvari). I saw in Angela a girl wrangling with the power of her sexual maturity the same way a child might cock and brandish a firearm they've accidentally acquired, mocking movies and playing with fire. An adolescent girl first reaching sexual

maturity in the 1990's, after absorbing countless overt and subconscious messages persuading her that she does not matter, that she is best tolerated when invisible, and that she is in every way inferior to her male counterparts, suddenly discovers that her budding breasts and shaping curve attract attention of those same boys and men she's been taught are better than she is, a kind of attention that comes with gifts, favors, good times, free meals and entertainment, and admirers ready to act as knights or as servants for her every whim—at least on the surface.

In other words, ignored or under-appreciated for most of her young adult life, a girl grows, quite suddenly, into a vague awareness of a power she now possesses, one she does not fully understand and that she is compelled by forces both internal and external to explore, to test its reaches and limits, curious and unsuspecting of the dire consequences it may wreak on others and, more likely, on herself. Jill Talbot offers a glimpse into the alluring call of sexual maturity in her short memoir, "What I Learned in Homemaking," published in *The Rumpus*:

> My mother called girls like Tina "dirty," and those girls called me "bitch," not for what I did, but what I didn't consider. I'm sure Tina dismissed and taunted me for being what she had never had a chance to be herself, and I, curious about her hard edges and thick eyeliner, felt that stepping into the dark recesses of her territory was the only way to ensure she never threatened mine. In short, I was afraid of her, of what she knew, but I was also afraid of my own not knowing.

Sadly, Jill Talbot's sexual experimentation soon takes an ugly turn and ends in a horrific if predictable violence. Talbot soon puts an end to meeting boys in the back of the gym for make-out sessions. Her punishment for having dangled the red fruit of sexual temptation before the horny imagination of adolescent teenagers, then taking it away, is predictably ugly. She is soon ambushed at lunch, dragged to the school's bathroom by a dozen boys, and molested in the stall.

She looked seductive; she knew what she was doing; girls grow up faster than boys…

Those assumptions have a tendency to crop up in sex abuse cases because to this day most of us fail to conceive how sexuality for a girl is like a loaded gun. While Hollywood and the established literary curriculum continue to advance the idea that a girl's physical maturity makes her a nymphette, fair prey to sexual advances—while at large we continue to ignore that even a smart, precocious girl may not necessarily have yet acquired the right tools to make appropriate decisions about safe sexual experimentation—memoirs on sexual abuse will continue to proliferate and crowd the book shelves of our libraries, and a few of those books, or films, or graphic novels, will stand out above the others to teach us something. Most of them will likely fail to move audiences past a temporary sensationalism inherent in stories about inappropriate sex. What we learn from *The Tale* is that just as our sense of self is fluid and shifting so should the narratives that attempt to encompass them be. We do not experience life only on the physical level. The focus on interiority that Fox's dramatization brings to the screen honors creative nonfiction's foundational principles, even as it moves past them into the realm of fiction, and it offers those who want to reconstruct the fragmented emotional landscape of trauma memories new tools for exploration that can gap the chasm between the verifiable and the unknowable.

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