IT NEVER TOUCHED ME

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Psychotherapy: Portraits in Fiction

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Introduction

“It Never Touched Me” by Ann-Marie Wells

Most forms of therapy are premised on the assumption that the acceptance and expression of the contradictory and painful feelings provoked by grief are essential to emotional health. When we choose to forget or deny the legitimate suffering in our lives, we sacrifice our capacity for pleasure as well. In this story the therapist makes an intervention and the patient responds. Her silent associations demonstrate a strangely distanced flood of painful memories, vague fears, and morbid fantasies that must more explicitly be felt in the course of therapy.

It Never Touched Me

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The psychiatrist was saying something about the war, as Mrs. Lewis had known he would. That was one of the reasons she hadn't wanted to consult him when her husband had urged her to; she had known that he would be like this—stupid, bland, with comforting generalizations. "The war has affected us all," he said.

"Not me," she wanted to tell him. "Everyone but me." If there was something the matter, if she was acting neurotic, it was because she was forty, or because she had made wrong choices twenty years before, or because of certain mistakes of her parents, for which she wasn't responsible—with her, it wasn't the war. She wanted to tell him, but she didn't dare speak, for she could feel herself getting angry. And after the anger would come tears. If she began to cry, she wouldn't be able to' stop, and the hour would be wasted—the precious, expensive hour that was to illuminate the mistakes her parents had made, for which she wasn't responsible.

She had been a little girl in April, 1917. She remembered oatmeal bread, and the parade in November, 1918, to celebrate the false armistice, with a burning effigy of the Kaiser. And by September, 1930, she had had two little

girls of her own, one six and the other almost three, and a successful husband, and a pleasant, easy, full suburban life.

She remembered all the dates that meant so much to other people. September 8, 1939. She had taken the children swimming the afternoon the Germans had marched into Poland. Afterward, they had had dinner in the restaurant pavilion overlooking the lake. It was always a treat to eat away from home, not to have to cook the meal and wash the dishes. The children were unusually good, quiet, tidy, and agreeable, leaving her attention to spare for the sunset over the water and for a rich, Byronic unhappiness about the words coming from the radio: "The lamps are going out all over Europe . . ." Appropriately enough, the sun went down into the lake in a gold-and-crimson splendor. The end of civilization. It had been a pleasant afternoon. And now, seven years after the end of civilization, she was consulting an expensive psychiatrist because she couldn't control her temper with the children and flew into rages at the most trivial provocation, or at none at all.

She remembered a spring morning in 1940 when she had unfolded the *Times* and read that the Germans had invaded Norway. And a month or so later, on Mother's Day, she and her husband and the children had driven over to see her mother-in-law. Her husband's brothers and sisters and their families were there, and all the men sat around the radio with their heads in their hands and listened to the destruction of Holland. They couldn't be persuaded to come to dinner until it was cold, although you could hear the

radio perfectly well in the dining room.

She was pregnant that summer, and the people who had been so flatteringly happy about the birth of her first two children looked at her a little askance, wondering—some covertly—why she should want another child now. It wasn't until a year or two later that babies got to be fashionable again. "I suppose you expect to be congratulated on the production of cannon fodder," one of her franker friends had written. It was a drearily uncomfortable pregnancy; all that summer she moved heavily about the house and yard to the sound of doom from the radio, and the boy was born in the very middle of the Battle of Britain. He was a frail and fretful baby; they tried all sorts of formulas and still he wouldn't gain weight. She remembered thinking in October when she was desperately frightened about him, If I could choose, would I rather London should stand or this new formula agree with him? It was a game she had played with herself all her life, to test the honesty of her emotions, but this time, of course, the question was its own answer. Well, the formula had turned out all right (Similac), and London had weathered the storm, too, no thanks to her.

Mrs. Lewis was a pacifist by conviction, or had been in college. Since then, there had never been time really, to reexamine her convictions. No one cared at all whether a middle-aged mother of three was a pacifist or not. She had hoped America would not try to get in the war, and yet she felt dreadfully ashamed to be happy and comfortable.

Her husband was pleased that he was not too old to register for the first draft, though of course he did not expect to be called. The December afternoon when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor was not pleasant, as the September afternoon two years earlier had been. The children were romping in the living room and would not be quiet. It was one of the first times she had screamed at them. “Listen!” she said. “It’s war! It’s the most dreadful day of your lives. You’ll remember it as long as you live!” So they stopped romping to listen a few minutes, obediently, like the well-trained children they were, and then went to the basement playroom to finish the game.

She remembered that month—how gay and excited people were; the belligerent Christmas cards, the lavish Christmas parties, with people saying, “It’s *just* what we needed to *unify* the country. There *couldn’t* have been a better way for us to get into it”; and everyone jealously eager to be in more danger of air raids than any of his friends.

Shortly after the first of the year, she heard that young George Darnell had been killed at Pearl Harbor, and for a little while she believed that the war had touched her. George Darnell had grown up next door to her. He was six or eight years younger, and she remembered him as a gentle, large-eyed little boy, on the high-school swimming team, worrying about whether he would get an appointment to West Point. He was afraid he couldn’t pass the physical examination. She remembered how proud the Darnell family and the neighbors had been when George got the appointment. After he was

commissioned, he came to call once, very handsome in his uniform, bringing his pretty, stupid little wife. Now he was dead before his thirtieth year, because his family had taken an automobile trip the year he was fifteen and he had seen West Point and decided he wanted to go to school there.

She mentioned George's death a few times at teas and luncheons; it was so early in the war that almost no one else had lost friends or relatives, and people listened solemnly and respectfully. She really felt sad about it, too, didn't she? You couldn't help being fond of the little boy who grew up next door.

She stopped mentioning him after his wife's picture was in the paper, accepting George's medal. Apparently, someone had told the girl you should always smile for a newspaper photographer but had neglected to mention that a recent widow was a sound exception to the rule. There she was in the paper, draped in silver-fox skins, clutching a huge armload of roses, and grinning like a May queen. That was all that was left of George anywhere in the world.

The dates got mixed up after 1942, Mrs. Lewis couldn't remember when the tire shortage began, and when it was coffee or gasoline or butter or cigarettes or meat—only that all the things she had worried about were inconvenient but trivial, so that she had had to be ashamed of minding. In the grocery story, they put up posters of a savage-looking Jap, labelled "Blame

Him for shortages," but people kept right on resenting and suspecting one another.

Then there was the loneliness of thinking things that no one else seemed to think. In her youth, she had supposed it would be splendid to have original ideas and the courage of her convictions, like Newton or Galileo or Shelley, but there was no use talking pacifism when it would only embarrass the children at school. Besides, she really didn't see that anyone had more freedom of choice than she had herself, or that the country could be doing anything but what it was doing. She took it out in having odd notions—for instance, that it was a dirty trick for MacArthur to duck out at Bataan.

"But he *had* to," people would say, horrified or impatient, when they deigned to answer at all. "He was under *orders.* He was *needed."*

O.K., she would answer stubbornly, but Washington didn't duck out at Valley Forge.

Then, there were other people's dead, letters of condolence, scrap drives, correspondents coming home and expressing their horror at the way the American people were taking the war. What did they expect her to do—howl? And her own life went on, just the same, but uncomfortable.

There had been a Japanese girl in her class in college—a childish, yellow butterfly of a girl named Fumiko. Mrs. Lewis had tried to find what had happened to her; someone said Fumiko had married a Communist and been

disowned by her family, someone else that she was head of a flourishing girls' school near Tokyo. There was a girl, too, who married a Dutchman and appeared in the alumnae magazine as Mevrouw Something-or-Other, with a Dutch address. First, she had not been heard from for two years, and then she was dead of malnutrition and exposure, leaving two orphan sons. But it was impossible to think of her as anything but a fat, cheerful girl with pink cheeks and yellow, curly hair.

Donating blood was nothing at all like what Mrs. Lewis had been led to expect—just lying there on the table, opening and closing her hand, wondering if the nurse had forgotten about her, and, if so, whether she should risk making a scene or just bleed quietly to death.

Once, sitting in a doctor's crowded waiting room, looking at a slick-paper magazine, she had come upon a full page picture of two dead German children. Their mother had dressed them neatly, shot each one through the head, and laid them out on the floor of the living room, hands crossed on their breasts, because the Americans were coming. Then it was Mrs. Lewis's turn, and she laid the magazine down and went into the office with her own little boy and told the doctor that the swelling in the child's glands wouldn't go down, though he'd had his tonsils out and always took his vitamin pills and got eleven hours' sleep at night. The doctor was too busy to keep his records very accurately, and she had to remind him tactfully that her little boy was the one who couldn't take sulfathiazole—at least, it always made him break

out in red spots all over and his fever would go up instead of down. All right, it was funny after the picture. But it wouldn't help to shoot her own little boy through the head and lay him out on the parlor floor —though, to judge from the daily papers, an increasing number of people seemed to think that it would. What could she do, then, that would be any less absurd than looking after his glands?

Then Germany surrendered, and the thin, shrewish girl at the grocery, who kept chocolate and bacon under the counter for other people but never for Mrs. Lewis, was saying, "It's over but it's not official, so we don't close for the day." And people smiled uncertainly as the line inched forward. On V-J Day, there were guests for dinner; she had cooked a big fish on a plank, and the conversation was divided about equally between fish and victory.

The war was over, and she could be glad. And then the boys started coming back, brown, bright-eyed, smiling, showing photographs, as if they had been on an extended hunting expedition. She had seen them in newsreels, in magazines, in dispatches, in fiction, in plays—haggard, lost, turned overnight from boys to old men, destroyed—and here they were, back again, looking as if nothing had happened, griping worse than civilians about cigarettes and shirts. Those who had hated Jews or niggers or Roosevelt still did, and some who hadn't hated anything, hated labor unions now. The reckless ones who had needed Army discipline to make men of them were still boys. It was all over, the end of civilization, the greatest drama of hu-

manity. She had watched it from a cushioned seat in the loges, and it had left her feeling dreadfully let down.

"I may as well set you straight on that now, Doctor," Mrs. Lewis said. "Whatever's wrong with me, it isn't the war." And then she began to cry.