



# Excerpt from Unspeakable Truths and Happy Endings

**By Rebecca Coffey**

*Copyright 1998 by Sidran Press and Veritas Programming, Ltd. Not to be reprinted without permission of the publisher.*

I first met Madeline Goodman in the reception area of an out-patient clinic for victims of violence. We had both arrived early for a session in which she would tell me her story in the company of her therapist.

Madeline is 40. She is clearly intelligent, poised, and pretty.

Several times during our initial chat I noticed Madeline flinch when I gave specific answers to her questions about what I had learned through my research about the emotional aftershocks of violence. The flinches were not at all like wincing. They were more like quick looks inward. She always recovered with a broad smile that seemed designed to mask the fact that she had been momentarily “away” and hadn’t paid attention to the last few words I had said.

During the session with her therapist, as she recounted her story, I noticed much larger flinches. At those times she seemed to mentally drift off. Gradually the drifting off became more pronounced. In fact, she seemed to occasionally enter completely into the past. In the transcript of our session, these periods are usually made subtly evident by her use of the present tense. During the session her presence in the past was more unmistakable. While telling her story, she would get up, wander about the room, and dramatically relive what she was saying.

What she was saying became particularly painful for her to recount. As the story picked up momentum, Madeline's demeanor seemed, to my untrained eye, a little bizarre. Her behavior, combined with the fact that she told every detail of what she remembered, threw me into a panic. What she had said so far wasn't all that scary. But I knew we were only at the prelude. What would happen when she got to the actual rapes? Would I have to hear every sensory detail? Would her behavior become more bizarre, perhaps violent?

I realized I could no longer tolerate even the prospect of what she might say.

Excusing myself and leaving was impossible, for I knew that Madeline was going through the pain of telling as an act of trust and faith. She trusted me to be able to hear her. She had faith that if other women who had been raped could read her story in my book they would somehow be strengthened. I had to stay.

So I struck a deal with myself. For as long as my responses to her felt out of control, I would pretend that I was watching the particularly brilliant soliloquy of a playwright/actress. Once I was calmer, however, I would have to reengage my appreciation for the reality of her situation.

This worked. And from the emotional distance I had created for myself I was able for the first time to notice the syrupy self-contempt and irony with which her voice was frequently sugared. I noticed that when she spoke of her own inability to ward off danger, she used somewhat archaic forms of speech, which made her sound as though she were a child reading from an early readers' primer. As a dramatic technique (I told myself) this was brilliant; it highlighted her innocence, which threw the depravity of her father, and eventually the rapists, into relief. It also made me feel like I was watching a Stephen King movie: As she described her approach to the suspiciously remote field I could imagine hearing cinematic birds of innocence begin to sing and then a sting of spooky music warning me that something truly shocking was about to happen.

But mostly what I noticed was the continuing urgency of her voice. Each and every syllable was forced out of her mouth. Madeline the Playwright/Actress, I decided (in my last few seconds of self-imposed emotional distance), is the anti-e.e. cummings. If her monologue were a poem, it would be written in all caps.

Having calmed myself, I began to really listen, which was when I learned what the urgency was all about.

\* \* \*

**Madeline:** “A needle goes in my side. I spin around real quick. I said, ‘Wait a minute! Wait a minute! I think a bee stung me.’ I didn’t know it was a needle. Then I looked up and said, ‘What is it? Did you do something? Did you stick me with something?’ And he nodded ‘Yes.’ And he called me his little angelic being—because I was dressed in white, I guess, is why he said that. ‘Well what did you give me?’ I had to hold very still. He said that the needle had broken off. And I couldn’t look. I couldn’t look. I have always hated needles. He told me to hold very still so he could get the needle out of my side. And all I think he did was inject me with more of the drug. It did not hurt. He was very gentle putting it in the second time....”