

# The Sick Child

Elinor Kapp

The greatest unnameable fear for all of us who are parents is that of losing a child. We hear about it in others, we read about it in the papers and a cold chill touches us. The most common deaths are sudden in accidents but many parents have to cope with the long drawn-out trauma, alternating hope and fear, of sickness. No-one can ever know if or when or where they may experience the policeman at the door or the embarrassed compassion in the doctor's face.

If any bereavement can be likened to amputation of part of ourselves the death of a child attacks the very soul. For parents it is an amputation not only of an adored individual but of our posterity, our sexuality, our genes, our future hopes and a million memories that turn in an instant from pleasure to torment. The most beloved partner, friend or lover has been grafted onto us at a later stage and somehow we sense deep down we could, perhaps, survive their loss. We know at the deepest level that we could not survive the loss of a beloved child. And yet – people do survive. Most somehow get through the experience as best they can. Often they wish they did not need to survive, but parents like the mother who killed herself recently after the suicide of her son are the exception not the norm, if only because there are usually other children to care for or look after however inadequately. The death of a brother or sister also resonates in a unique way. They are a childhood companion, a sort of mirror, and the repository of fierce and ambivalent feelings. Edvard Munch the Norwegian artist, lost his mother to tuberculosis at the age of five and nine years later his fifteen-year-old sister to the same illness. He painted the first versions of *The Sick Child* in the 1890s and returned to it obsessively over the years. He described the picture as "a breakthrough in my art, most of my later pictures derived from this painting." More than any of his other pictures it aroused huge controversy and he describes the opening day of the exhibition, "A crowd of people milling round the picture. You could hear screams of horror and laughter." This version of *The Sick Girl*, was painted in 1926 when Munch was sixty-two.

The colours appear to be mostly a reddish brown contrasting starkly with green. The patches of light and dark are fragmented and

the dark areas are composed of brown and blue, appearing almost black. The shadows seem to menace behind the body of the woman and solidify within her, passing across the bed in harsh lines to join the green of the girl's jacket. There is darkness also behind the head of the bed. Everything focuses on the girl's pallid face. Her hair flames with life and streams onto the pillow like blood in contrast to the absolute stillness and immobility of the figures. The painter's agitation is shown in the scribbles of paint and the harsh brushstrokes. The reddish glow is picked up in the bedside table on the left and the medicine glass on the right and in the woman's hand and neck, which is all we can see of her flesh. This is a stark painting of emotion frozen at a point of unbearable pain. One senses the closeness between the two figures, whether child with mother or with nurse. Perhaps at an earlier stage there was much mutual communing between these two; dozens of tiny details of intimacy, sharing and even pleasure. In sickness the daily routine is reduced to a miniature palette and to an immediacy which can be mutually rewarding. Even the times of anger, whining or



*The Sick Child*, 1926-27. Edvard Munch.  
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impatience are part of the loving network. At this moment all these things are swept away. We know that this girl is going to die, not because she is so ill – many people who look as bad as this survive – but because she herself knows it. The woman is not bending her head in resignation. In another context it might signify acceptance, even defeat, but her shoulders are still upright, braced back, and her hand is strong, stretched out and suddenly halted in some practical task or gesture of life. Only her head has suddenly dropped forward. She is no longer able to look at the child's face because of what she has seen there. The girl is no longer looking at her but through and beyond her. There is a remoteness in her look that goes deeper than resignation. Her remoteness transcends humanity, transcends her age. She is now past any stages of hoping, despairing or fretting. Munch has painted an unbearable

moment of truth. In sickness the loss does not always come at the moment of death but at the time when the loved person moves out of the reach of our experience into the loneliness within themselves, and we who love them so much are left behind. No wonder the crowds in that Norwegian exhibition nurtured on sentimental 19th century versions of death bed scenes were shocked into screaming and hardly knew if they should laugh or cry. Nearly a hundred years later we are used to images of grim reality but are no better than they were at facing mortality, so this picture retains all its poignancy and power to shock us into a moment of stillness.

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