

tant to be experimented on, linguistics because its subjects are too human. No longer are children impressed rudely from the crib, à la Psamtik, to serve as guinea pigs. But the revelations about how we acquire language still come from children—wild children, who have grown up with beasts as their only companions; abused or neglected children whose family histories replicate the isolation in the shepherd's hut, sometimes with far more attendant horror. The cases are exceedingly rare and generally fleeting. They become the property of whichever researcher is fortunate enough to be present at whichever dark hour.

In that regard, no subject has ever fallen into the lap of science out of more incomprehensible a world than the little girl who limped through the doors of a Los Angeles County welfare office in the fall of 1970, accompanied by her nearly blind and almost equally traumatized mother.

2

Temple City, California, is in many ways a typical town of the San Gabriel Valley, and Golden West Avenue, which runs due north through it, is a typical Valley residential street. In its straightness—for it is as straight as a surveyor's rod—you might divine a purpose, might suppose that its intended destination is the San Gabriel Mountains, whose shadowed canyons and snow-paneled peaks rise above the endless grid of suburban valley streets like the promise of a less confining world. Golden West Avenue never reaches the San Gabriels, near as they are.

It never escapes far into the more prosperous reaches of Arcadia. It is interrupted in its northward progress by other straight streets, wider and faster ones, and the San Gabriels remain a taunting vision, as distant in their way as the affluent hills of Hollywood, fifteen miles to the west.

Heading up Golden West from Las Tunas Drive, Temple City's main drag, you pass the parklike acreage of the city hall and citizens' center and the steep-roofed Christian Church. Then the public places are behind you and an orderly regime takes over of small homes, wooden or stucco for the most part, becoming more modest, shopworn, sunstruck, and insular block by block as you head north. Each house has a drive and a yard, and the yards are distinguished one from the other by a low, bright, chain-link fence or masonry wall or, more often, by a change in the texture of the grass.

Toward the Arcadia town line, a quintet of royal palms floats over the avenue like an incongruous apparition, their vapor trail trunks rising like rockets from curbside, their foliate starbursts a hundred feet above the ground. They are the street's only aristocratic flourish. For here there are no rolling estates, no guarded gates, no Armed Response medallions such as dot the curbs of Bel Air and Mulholland Drive. The equation of prominence and privacy that prevails in the wealthy precincts of Los Angeles is here turned on its head: security lies in a respectful anonymity—an injunction, in a land of compact privacies, to mind one's own business. People don't come to Temple City to be discovered, they come to be left alone. Golden West Avenue is above all a quiet street of quiet families. Before the disruption of that quiet in November 1970, the residents of one small house behind the row of royal palms

were known to their neighbors as the quietest family of all.

The disruption was spectacular—enough so to earn a week's worth of stories in the *Los Angeles Times*, sandwiched between accounts of the trial of Charles Manson, the policies of Gov. Ronald Reagan, the acquittal of the My Lai massacre soldiers, and the bombing of Hanoi. "GIRL, 13, PRISONER SINCE INFANCY, DEPUTIES CHARGE; PARENTS JAILED," read the headline on November 17. The following day, a story headed "MYSTERY SHROUDS HOME OF ALLEGED CHILD PRISONER" featured a photograph of two men standing in a driveway: the girl's elderly, bespectacled father, clothed in rumpled khakis and a rumpled hat, one hand in his pocket and the other loosely holding a cigarette; and her brother, a tall teenager dressed in black, his arms folded and his face wadded in bel-ligerent distress.

But it was another photograph that inflamed the public imagination and brought the curious cruising along Golden West Avenue in a slow, neck-craning procession that lasted the better part of a week. The photograph is of a girl's face—smooth, olive-shaped, pretty. A strand of dark hair has escaped from behind her ear to hang across her forehead. Her head is turned with an attentive tilt toward the camera, but her eyes do not meet the lens. She looks above us, as though some object of interest were hovering over the photographer's shoulder. Her expression gives nothing away. It is composed but not self-conscious, withdrawn but with no trace of sullenness. Her mouth, its full lower lip closed against the serrated curve of the upper in a perfect Cupid's bow, turns up at the ends in what might be the beginning of a smile, except that she is otherwise so serious, so pensive and watchful. The energy in her face is

all in her eyes—without beseeching, they attract. If her face has an adult's earnestness, her eyes have the straightforward curiosity of a toddler, unburdened by any evident capacity for prejudice or appraisal. Her innocence is incongruous with the newspaper's report of the epic abuse she had suffered.

That her condition was cause for concern had been immediately apparent to the social worker who received her and her mother in the welfare office one morning in early November. Like much else in the child's history, her arrival there seems to have been a fluke. The mother had come seeking help not for the child but for herself; three weeks earlier, she had finally managed to flee an abusive marriage and was living nearby with her parents, who were all but destitute. Cataracts and a detached retina had rendered her 90 percent blind in her left eye and totally blind in the right. She was searching for the office for services for the blind but, leading her daughter by one hand and her aged mother by the other, she had stumbled mistakenly into the general social services office. The eligibility worker whom she approached was transfixed by the child, a small, withered girl with a halting gait and a curious posture—unnaturally stooped, hands held up as though resting on an invisible rail. The worker alerted her supervisor to what she thought was an unreported case of autism in a child she estimated to be six or seven years old.

The supervisor did not confirm the autism diagnosis but agreed that something was amiss. The ensuing inquiries found the girl to be a teenager, though she weighed only fifty-nine pounds and was only fifty-four inches tall. She was in much worse physical shape than at first suspected: she was incontinent, could not chew solid food and could hardly swallow,

could not focus her eyes beyond twelve feet, and, according to some accounts, could not cry. She salivated constantly, spat indiscriminately. She had a ring of hard callus around her buttocks, and she had two nearly complete sets of teeth. Her hair was thin. She could not hop, skip, climb, or do anything requiring the full extension of her limbs. She showed no perception of heat or cold.

Of most interest to the scientists who were to become her constant companions was that she could not talk. What the social worker had mistaken for an autistic child's abstinence from verbal communication was in fact a complete inability. The girl's vocabulary comprised only a few words—probably fewer than twenty. She understood "red," "blue," "green," and "brown"; "Mother" and some other names; the verbs "walk" and "go"; and assorted nouns, among them "door," "jewelry box," and "bunny." Her productive vocabulary—those words she could utter—was even more limited. She seemed able to say only "Stopit," and "Nomore," and a couple of shorter negatives.

The social worker paid a visit to the child's home and convinced the mother that her daughter needed attention. She was admitted to Childrens Hospital of Los Angeles for treatment of extreme malnutrition. An explanation for the child's state was eventually pieced together, thanks to the efforts of the Temple City police in the days following her discovery and to the persistent elaborations of scientists and social workers over the next several years.

A doctoral dissertation on the child, written by Susan Curtiss, a graduate student at the University of California at Los Angeles and the linguist who was to spend the most time with

her, begins, "To understand this case history, one must understand [the] family background." And, indeed, every scientist involved with the unfortunate child would be drawn again and again through that background, much as the rubberneckers had been drawn down Golden West Avenue—hoping to find in the neighborhood, in the house, and now in the story of the household, some answer.

3

Like most personal histories, the child's preceded her by years. Her parents had migrated to the Los Angeles area from different parts of the country, out of similarly desperate circumstances. Clark, her father, had grown up in foster homes and orphanages in his native Pacific Northwest; Irene, her mother, was from Altus, Oklahoma. Though Irene's upbringing seems rock stable compared with Clark's, it could hardly be called idyllic. She was so often left to be cared for by family friends that she felt she had two sets of parents. She called the friends Mamaw and Dadaw, but in that she was merely following an established convention, for Irene was not the first generation of her family that Mamaw and Dadaw had helped raise. Years earlier, when Irene's father, a teenager then, had been permanently thrown out of the house by his own natural father, Mamaw and Dadaw had taken him in as well.

Growing up, Irene felt closer to her father than to her mother, who seemed to her stern and unloving. Irene remembers one incident from her early years when her mother forced

her to help pull the laundry through an old-fashioned wringer washing machine. The crank handle slipped and hit the child in the head, causing neurological damage that would eventually contribute to blindness in one eye. Another of her memories is of processions of men passing the house carrying buckets. She asked where the men were going, and her mother said, "They're going to town to the soup line. They aren't as lucky as we are. We have food." The dustbowl had reached Oklahoma.

Irene's family was lucky indeed—her father had a job as night foreman at the cottonseed mill. But as the drought lengthened, they, too, decided to leave Altus. They headed west, to southern California, where Irene's father found work in a filling station. Their fortunes in their new state would never rise far above meager. Like other real-life Joads, they had run out of continent before reaching the promised land, and the family's three children approached maturity with little prospect except the assurance of a restricted future. When Irene was in her early twenties, she found a traditional solution for her predicament and, traditionally, her parents opposed it. The man she married was twenty years her senior.

They met in Hollywood, in a drugstore where Irene was employed behind the soda fountain and where Clark would stop by on occasion to chat with the druggist about the horses. Clark was unemployed, but that didn't last long—the war was on and every hand was needed. The government impressed him into a profession for which he was suited by inclination, for despite his lack of schooling, Clark loved mathematics and devoured whatever books he could find on algebra, trigonometry, and geometry. The government, in Irene's words, "fresh-

ened him up" on his math, and turned him into a good machinist, putting him to work in the aircraft assembly lines in Santa Monica. In a photograph taken during their early years together, Irene and Clark appear to be a happy couple, even a bit glamorous. They are leaning against a shiny black sedan; Clark's crisp fedora is tipped onto the back of his head as he and his wife turn to each other with broad and mutual smiles.

After V-J Day, Clark parlayed his newfound skills into a good job with the aircraft industry and proved good at it. He bet moderately on the horses at the nearby Santa Anita racetrack. He and his bride watched their money and enjoyed listening to radio shows. But surface felicities aside, Irene had run headlong out of a confining upbringing into a confining marriage. Clark was jealous of her least attention to others; she generously describes his attitude as "overly protective." She has said that her life came to an end on her wedding day.

Prominent among Clark's restrictions was his express desire not to have children. For one thing, they were noisy. Late in Irene's first pregnancy, five years into their marriage, Clark beat her severely. In the hospital for treatment of her injuries, Irene went into labor and gave birth to a healthy daughter. The infant's crying infuriated Clark, and she was placed in the garage, where, at the age of two and a half months, she died. Irene contends that the girl had been put there only to spare her the noise while the linoleum was being removed from the kitchen floor, and that once in the garage she had been struck with "quick pneumonia." The likelihood is that behind the euphemism was a case of death by exposure. A subsequent infant was more literally a victim of the couple's incompatibility: it died of Rh blood poisoning soon after birth. Irene's third

pregnancy produced a healthy son. He survived infancy, but his development was stunted by an approximation of the neglect that had killed his oldest sibling. He was slow to walk and at three years of age was not yet toilet-trained. However, he was saved by the intercession of his paternal grandmother, who took him in and kept him for several months, long enough to get him back on track. In April 1957, Clark and Irene had their fourth child, a girl. She, too, had Rh blood poisoning, but she was given a transfusion soon after birth.

Back home with their new daughter, Clark and Irene received a package postmarked Oklahoma. It contained a Bible. Inside the cover was a note of congratulation, bearing the words, "Dear Irene, We was so glad to hear of your little girl. Now you have a pair. We wish we could send her something fine but I don't know of anything that will help her through life any better than this little book it will be a lamp to her foot steps. May God Bless you as her mother and may she be a fine girl for Jesus is my prayer." The gift was from Mamaw, who had watched over two generations of the family and was now wishing the best for a third. There were early indications that Mamaw's prayer would go unheard—the growing girl suffered the same developmental fate as her older brother, lagging behind in her habits and physical stature, and this time there was no paternal grandmother to rescue her at the critical moment.

Clark had an extraordinary attachment to his mother, surprising considering how little of his childhood had been spent with her. She was a flamboyant woman—at one time, she had managed a brothel—and was given to traveling armed. The

prodigal mother seemed intent on making up for her inattention to Clark's upbringing by doting on him in his middle age. Until he picked up the machinist's trade, she had supported him. Even afterward, she helped pay his bills and frequently drove over to his and Irene's house to help out—in Irene's estimation, making a pest of herself. When they were together, Clark and his mother argued. For one thing, she thought her son intolerably straitlaced. Nevertheless, he was slavishly devoted to her, to the point where Irene never became more than a secondary allegiance in his life.

During one of her visits, in December 1958, Clark's mother was struck by a car and killed as she crossed the street with her grandson to buy an ice-cream cone. Irene called Clark at work. He rushed to the hospital, but his mother was almost beyond identification—in its frantic escape, the car had dragged her a long ways down the street. A teenager was arrested the next day and charged with hit-and-run and drunken driving—he received a probationary sentence. The court's leniency fueled Clark's fury.

After the accident, Irene recounts, things started changing. Clark's transformation was later described to me by Jay Shurley, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral science at the University of Oklahoma who was called in to the case and got to know what remained of the family, though he came too late to meet Clark. "Clark went beyond grief," Jay Shurley told me. "His depression began feeding on itself, on his isolation. The external world had given him a signal that he didn't count, his mother didn't count. Clark was very serious minded. He allowed himself no leeway to get around problems. He wasn't

even religious in a way that would have helped him deal with trauma. He became enmeshed in his own withdrawal. His mistrust went beyond reality."

Clark decided that a world without his mother, a world that did not care to adequately punish her murderer, was a world he could best do without. He quit his job and moved his family into his mother's two-bedroom house on Golden West Avenue, where he would live out the last decade of his life as a recluse, with his family as virtual prisoners.

4

Irene's world closed in on her severely at this time. Her encroaching blindness made her almost completely dependent on her tormentor. Their son was allowed out of the house to attend school or to play with a neighbor but for little else, and within the house he was effectively a hostage. He slept on a pallet on the living room floor; his parents also slept in the living room—his mother on the floor and Clark in an easy chair in front of a defunct television set, sometimes with a gun in his lap. The main bedroom, according to some accounts, was kept undisturbed as a shrine to Clark's mother. But it was the daughter—twenty months old when the family moved—who bore the brunt of Clark's renunciation. "In essence, Clark appointed himself a guardian to his family," Jay Shurley told me. "His delusion was that his daughter was retarded and was going to be very vulnerable to exploitation. He dreaded the idea of people taking advantage of her."

After one of the child's rare early medical examinations, a pediatrician noted on her records that she was "slow," and pronounced her a "retarded little girl with kernicterus"—a condition that sometimes results from a botched transfusion for Rh incompatibility. "Clark amplified that to delusional intensity—that this girl was profoundly retarded," Shurley told me. "He was convinced that she would need his protection from the evil of the world, and that no one was better prepared than he to recognize its evil. He didn't reckon, of course, on his own evilness. These people never do."

Clark's idea of protective custody is described in Susan Curtiss's doctoral dissertation, which was published as a book—*Genie: A Psycholinguistic Study of a Modern-Day 'Wild Child'*—in 1977 by Academic Press. In both the dissertation and the book, the girl is referred to not by her real name but by her scientific alias, Genie—the name used in the symposium papers, the psychology magazines, and the textbooks and contrived in order to protect the child's identity. Curtiss's account agrees with that of other investigators. She wrote:

In the house Genie was confined to a small bedroom, harnessed to an infant's potty seat. Genie's father sewed the harness, himself, unclad except for the harness, Genie was left to sit on that chair. Unable to move anything except her fingers and hands, feet and toes, Genie was left to sit, tied-up, hour after hour, often into the night, day after day, month after month, year after year. At night, when Genie was not forgotten, she was removed from her harness only to be placed into another restraining garment—a sleeping bag which her father had fashioned to hold Genie's arms station-

ary (allegedly to prevent her from taking it off). In effect, it was a straitjacket. Therein constrained, Genie was put into an infant's crib with wire mesh sides and a wire mesh cover overhead. Caged by night, harnessed by day, Genie was left to somehow endure the hours and years of her life.

There was little for her to listen to; there was no TV or radio in the house. Genie's bedroom was in the back of the house next to [the master] bedroom and a bathroom. . . . The father had an intolerance for noise, so what little conversation there was between family members in the rest of the house was kept at a low volume. Except for moments of anger, when her father swore, Genie did not hear any language outside her door, and thus received practically no auditory stimulation of any kind, aside from bathroom noises. There were two windows in her room, and one of them was kept open several inches. She may, therefore, have occasionally heard an airplane overhead or some other traffic or environmental noises; but set in the back of the house, Genie would not have heard much noise from the street.

Hungry and forgotten, Genie would sometimes attempt to attract attention by making noise. Angered, her father would often beat her for doing so. In fact, there was a large piece of wood left in the corner of Genie's room which her father used solely to beat her whenever she made any sound. Genie learned to keep silent and to suppress all vocalization. . . .

Just as there was little to listen to, there was not much for Genie to touch or look at. The only pieces of furniture in her room were the crib and the potty seat. There was no carpet on the floor, no pictures on the walls. There were two windows, but they were covered up except for a few

inches at the top out of which Genie could see the sky from one and the side of a neighboring house from the other. There was one dim, bare ceiling light bulb, a wall of closets, and another wall with the bedroom door. The room was a dirty salmon color. Occasionally, two plastic raincoats, one clear and one yellow, hung outside the closet in the room, and once in a while Genie was allowed to "play" with them. In addition, Genie was sometimes given "partly edited" copies of the TV log, with pictures that her father considered too suggestive removed (like women advertising swimming pools, etc.). She was also given an occasional empty cottage-cheese container, empty thread spools, and the like. These were Genie's toys; and together with the floor, her harness, and her body, they were her primary sources of visual and tactile stimulation.

Genie's diet was equally limited. She was given baby foods, cereals, an occasional soft-boiled egg. Under pressure from the father to keep contact with Genie to a minimum, she was fed hurriedly, usually by having food stuffed into her mouth. Should Genie choke and spit out some of her food, she would have her face rubbed in it. . . .

Genie's father was convinced that Genie would die. He was positive that she would not live past the age of twelve. He was so convinced of this that he promised his wife that if the child did live beyond twelve, the mother could seek help for Genie. But age twelve came and went; Genie survived, but the father reneged on his promise. The mother, too blind to even dial the phone and forbidden under threat of death to contact her own parents (who lived in the area), felt helpless to do anything.

Finally, when Genie was 13½ years old, Genie's mother, after a violent argument with her husband in which she threatened to leave unless he called her parents, succeeded in getting her husband to telephone her mother. Later that day Genie's mother took Genie and left her home and her husband.

Curtiss went on to relate the discovery of the girl: how she was taken into custody by the police; how the parents were arrested and charged with child abuse; how the child was admitted to the hospital. The family history is wrapped up, like Little Dorrit's, with a breath of exultation: "She had been discovered, at last."

But the real epitaph to the era was written by Clark himself. On the morning of November 20, 1970—the morning that he and his wife were to appear in court on charges of willful abuse or injury to the person or health of a minor—he spread out a blanket and a sheet of cellophane on the living room floor and shot himself through the right temple with a .38 caliber Smith and Wesson revolver that had once belonged to his mother. He was seventy years old. He left two notes, scrawled with a ballpoint pen. One was for the police and it read, in part, "My son is out in front with friends. He hasn't the slightest idea of what is going to happen." The second was to his son and included these instructions:

Don't take that shirt back. It's for my funeral. You know where my blue shirt is. Underwear in hall closet. I love you. Goodbye and be good.

—Dad

Clark did not leave a note for his wife or his daughter, but he did include in his farewells a sentence that seemed addressed to the public at large: to the press that had exposed his family's disarray; to the people in the automobiles, whose finger-pointing promenade had distressed him tremendously; to the scientists and doctors who had taken his daughter and renamed her. The sentence is as much a curse on the scientists' future efforts as it is an oblique defense of Clark's own past actions. He wrote, "The world will never understand."

Already in court that morning, Irene had heard her counsel enter a plea of not guilty, on the ground that she had been forced into her role by an abusive husband. The judge received a message and summoned the lawyers into chambers. Irene's counsel returned to tell her that her husband was dead. She was visibly shaken, the lawyer later recalled, but did not break down. "She just sat there, silent," he said. In a subsequent session, her plea was accepted.

Clark's suicide—reported, like the parents' arrest, on network news—did nothing to lessen interest in the case. The press had set up camp around Childrens Hospital, where Genie was now residing. Childrens was, and is, one of the most prominent and up-to-date pediatric facilities on the West Coast, and one well versed in the particular security concerns Genie presented, for, though its surrounding neighborhood and many of its patients are poor, it has also had among its clientele the children of Hollywood celebrities. Freed from her little room and placed in the most competent of professional hands, Genie was, in the view of the doctors and psychologists and others who were now becoming

involved with her progress, liberated. If such a thing was possible, she was to be given a chance at a new life, with new surroundings, a new future—even a new mission—to go along with her new name.

5

Room 2113 of Campbell Hall on the campus of the University of California at Los Angeles—the office of Susan Curtiss in the summer of 1988, when we first met—is the type of airless, overinhabited cul-de-sac that, were it a street in Paris, would be labeled in the guidebooks as an impasse. In academe, it is labeled something else: if not quite a boulevard, at least a respectable avenue.

Curtiss had risen through a succession of such offices to become an associate professor of linguistics at UCLA. She was sharing her small space with two of her graduate students. Her desk was crammed into a far corner of the room, and over it were several pictures tacked to an orange room divider. There were photographs of her two daughters, aged five and one, and there was a drawing of Curtiss herself, done by Genie almost fifteen years earlier. The drawing was a stick figure, made with a series of quick crayon strokes. It wasn't easy to decide whether the rendering was immature for an artist in her middle teens or, in a primitivist way, accomplished, for its portrayal of its subject was accurate: Curtiss is tall, twig skinny, and as nervous as summer lightning. She is also extraordinarily focused, in the ironclad manner of one who has long done

battle with the hectoring distractions of the academic world.

In 1971, when Genie entered her life, Curtiss was twenty-six years old and a first-year graduate student in the linguistics department. "I was one of the few linguists on campus studying language acquisition in children," she told me. "It seemed to me that once we came to understand language acquisition, we would have answers to most of the central questions of linguistics. Besides, I love children. It seemed as if it would be fun to have them be my source of data."

Her interests had put her in the right place at the right time, to say the least. She remembers the spring afternoon when she was summoned into the office of her faculty adviser, Victoria Fromkin. Fromkin, who became dean of the linguistics department and is now a professor emeritus, began discussing developments in a case of an abused and linguistically deprived child.

Curtiss had already heard of the case. "There had been a lot of press," she remembered. But now she was being invited in, on the ground level. "This was before the first research grant," she told me. "Before a lot of facts about the case were learned. As a new student, I found myself presented with an opportunity that changed my life in every way, personally as well as academically. Because the case is an important one, it shaped my future research, right down to today. I was just starting on the core curriculum then. I hadn't been exposed to many of the issues that Genie presented to me. I wasn't even aware of the critical-period hypothesis."

In 1971, the science of linguistics was perplexing even to some of its old hands. The critical-period hypothesis—the idea that there are certain distinct periods in a person's development