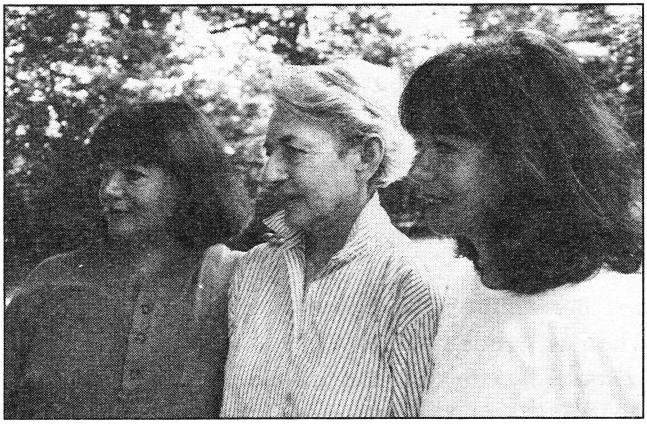

Paul Sidey

DAUGHTERS OF A HIDDEN CHILD

Hester and Marianne Velmans

Marianne: When I was asked to write a piece about my mother, the first thought that came into my head was that I couldn't do it.

Hester: Oh? Why not?

Marianne: I mean I can't talk about '*my* mother'. I can't talk about '*my* father', '*my* school', either. The singular pronoun implies disloyalty. Hypocrisy, even. There's something about being a twin . . .

Hester: I'd have the same problem.

Marianne: It's not *my* mother, it's *our* mother. And then I get this little voice whispering in my ear – '*freak*'. Being different from the other children. Remember?

Hester: I know. It's not just that you can't help using the royal 'we'; it's also that when you recall an event from the

past, you often can't remember which one of us actually experienced it.

Marianne: You've got to admit it's ironic – all those years of struggling to establish our individual identities, and it's still impossible to separate out the strands of that joint childhood of ours. I can't even lay claim to my relationship with my mother – *our* mother – without including you.

Hester: She was the ideal mother, you've got to give her that. When we needed her, as very young children.

Marianne: The centre of the universe.

Hester: No *I* was the centre of the universe. And you belonged there too. I'd say she was peripheral, but crucial. She was Atlas, she carried our world in her arms.

Marianne: You're right, I suppose she was peripheral. We didn't need anyone else – being an identical twin comes with a built-in guarantee that there is one person in the world who will always understand you. How can anyone, even a mother, compete with that?

Hester: She has always been sensitive to that. She never tried to compete or come between us. She was so careful not to play favourites. We were never jealous of each other, because she made certain there was never a sense of competition. We could always be sure of having the exact same measure of her love.

Marianne: But later on, we became aware of the way other people tried to play us off against each other. Do you remember how many times we were asked which one of us was better at maths, which one was better at English?

Hester: And then they'd proceed to tell us which one was prettier, which one was nicer . . .

Marianne: It's a wonder we didn't kill each other.

Hester: Right! But Mam would have none of it. She stuck to the story that neither of us was better or worse than the

other in any way. She didn't pretend that we were exactly the same – I suppose she knew it was important to acknowledge the differences – but she would not allow any value judgements.

Marianne: Well, this may sound like a value judgement on my part, but I honestly thought she was better than other mothers. She used to throw amazingly inventive birthday parties for us, didn't she? She sat and made things with us.

Hester: I'm sure that's why I still have this obsessive need to make things for people instead of simply buying presents. She told us that things we made with our own hands came from the heart.

Marianne: I do so little of that with my children. She had a lot of time for us. She was always there for us.

Hester: But remember what it was like later, when we were in secondary school and she resumed her postgraduate studies – didn't we feel abandoned then?

Marianne: A little. We couldn't stand her having other interests, not being there for us all the time. She'd spoiled us: we had never counted on her wanting a life of her own. But my children have had to put up with a tired, distracted mother from the very start. I'm always out at the office, and when I *am* home I've usually got my nose in a manuscript or a pile of papers.

Hester: I know you feel guilty about that, but who's to say that isn't the best thing for them? I mean, here I am – I quit my job to have kids, and yet I have as many doubts as you. The idea that you can dedicate yourself to being a full-time mother for a finite period, and then get on with your own life, is fundamentally flawed. Your children won't really understand, no matter how old they are. I see that now that I am trying to clear more time for my writing.

Marianne: Still, Mam remained the central presence in our

life. Even after she started studying again. Much greater, at any rate, than Daddy. She controlled us; he indulged us.

Hester: And we tolerated him. He was the odd man out in a house of women.

Marianne: Oh, I don't know . . .

Hester: Yes! He'd stride out of the room if the conversation got too intimate. Talking about your period in front of him was totally taboo.

Marianne: He was away such a lot, on business trips.

Hester: Even if he hadn't been, it would have been the same thing. He just wasn't part of the club. She was.

Marianne: She turned to him for help in disciplining us.

Hester: I don't remember if she was particularly strict with us or not. Do you?

Marianne: I think she was. More than I am with my kids.

Hester: That isn't difficult. You're a real pushover. And it was a different time, when parents were expected to be stricter.

Marianne: Funny, I can't think of anything specific now, although I remember her being strict.

Hester: Don't you remember the horrible brown lace-up shoes she made us wear? Or the sensible short haircuts – that's why I still insist on wearing my hair long. Yet she spoiled us too. The peeled and seeded grapes . . .

Marianne: When we were sick! That's the best, most comforting childhood memory I have of her. Her cool hand on my forehead, when something hurt.

Hester: We thought for a long time that she had healing powers in her hands. Did she?

Marianne: Do you still believe in the tooth fairy?

Hester: I don't know, I wish I could trust in Mam's magic the way I did then. Now that I have children of my own, I realise that being a mother forces you to become

magical – you start making up stories, you become a spinner of tales. Your children expect it of you. But eventually it starts to make you uncomfortable, because you're getting in deeper and deeper, and you realise that what you're doing is telling them lies. What it boils down to is you're trying to keep them from growing up.

Marianne: We did catch her out in the end, didn't we? The magic sleeping potion that worked like a charm but that turned out to be plain sugar dissolved in water. It took us years to figure that one out. Didn't we feel cheated?

Hester: I think what I'm saying is that with Mam, I haven't completely given up that need to believe. I usually assume she has her reasons. For me she still has that magical side to her. Her instincts are sometimes uncanny. And then there's the dowsing, too. People consult her when they need to dig a well for a new house. She's never failed to find water.

Marianne: Even if it requires drilling through layers of solid bedrock to get to it.

Hester: It's easy to be cynical. Like Daddy. Encouraging her, but with a smirk, as if we know better.

Marianne: They had this double act going – Pap the straight man, Mam the flake. She got teased about her use of English, her compulsive house cleaning, her weak grasp of geography. It was hard not to gang up with him, against her.

Hester: It's not fair. She's certainly as clever as he is, we've always known that. She was the one to turn to if you needed help with your maths homework, not Daddy. It must have hurt.

Marianne: I think she set herself up. Deliberately. Has it occurred to you that with Daddy, she was re-enacting her role in her own family when she was a child, the easy target of family jokes? Think of the stories she'd tell us, of how her father and older brothers used to put her down.

Her brothers used to regale the family and visitors with 'Edith-jokes' – stories with hilariously botched punchlines, supposedly as told by Edith. And when she complained at dinner that she never got a chance to speak, her father would look at his watch and say sternly, 'OK, Edith has exactly one minute to say something important. Ready – GO!'

Hester: I suppose it seemed funny to us when we were young. Now I am horrified by it, because I relate it to my own feeling of having no voice, of not being able to hold my own in conversation. Which is why I resort to writing, where I am free to say what I like.

Marianne: The point, though, is that the picture she painted for us at the time, of her family in Holland before the war, was so glowing, so perfect. The wonderful family that we never knew, that was wiped out before we were born – it seemed so much more interesting to us than our own! All that fun, that warmth, the creativity, the endless celebrations marked with poems, songs and paintings, the musical evenings, the sailing expeditions with her brothers and their glamorous girlfriends, the skating parties in winter . . .

Hester: At the end of a day's skating, warming their freezing toes with steaming hot pea soup . . .

Marianne: How many years was it before we came to realise that they didn't actually take off their skates and dip their feet into vats of burning hot soup?

Hester: When I reread her diaries last year, one of the things that struck me was that the fun continued well after the German invasion, even after they were kicked out of school, right up to 1942, when news came that Jewish boys and girls were being rounded up for so-called 'work camps', and the decision was made that Edith and Jules should go into hiding.

Marianne: Luckily Guus, the oldest, was already out of harm's way in America.

Hester: Where they all could have been – *should* have been – if it hadn't been for the little problem of obtaining a visa for the grandmother who'd come to live with them when things got too hot in her native Heidelberg, but who still had a German passport. If it hadn't been for those US immigration quotas, they'd have been safe. They had their passage all booked and everything.

Marianne: They couldn't have left the old lady behind, could they?

Hester: So they all stayed, and they all died.

Marianne: Except Mam.

Hester: Mam, the survivor.

Marianne: What a contrast. The wonderful childhood up to the age of fourteen or fifteen, and the horror afterwards. No wonder her post-war family – the husband and three daughters – could never quite measure up.

Hester: I don't agree. I don't think she expected us to live up to her memories. I think she accepted us for what we were, and appreciated us for what we were. If anything, I think what she was doing was holding on to the good memories because they helped to offset the horrible ones, the ones that came later.

Marianne: Don't you see you're still doing it?

Hester: Doing what?

Marianne: Protecting her. Being protective.

Hester: We owe her that, at least.

Marianne: We owe her that – is that what it's about? Tit for tat? She gave us a happy childhood and we owe her for it? Or is it that we owe her for losing her own happy childhood?

Hester: I don't know, I just feel guilty for not doing enough for her, not showing my appreciation enough, not trying

hard enough to make her happy. I get a pang when I read the soppy anniversary poems she wrote to her parents, or the loving letters they wrote to her, they were so openly . . .

Marianne: Sentimental?

Hester: To put it bluntly. It would be interesting to live in a time when sentimentality wasn't the great taboo it is to us.

Marianne: It's not that we can't appreciate it. It's just that we can't do it.

Hester: It's not your style, no. You're so good at hiding your feelings.

Marianne: Mam doesn't do it either – show her feelings, I mean. Not really.

Hester: She takes her cue from us, perhaps. She's very careful not to demand too much from us. It's a different world. She doesn't want to be out of step.

Marianne: Perhaps she taught herself to hide her feelings when she was in hiding. When she had to be so careful not to give herself away. And perhaps you could say I learned to hide my feelings from her.

Hester: How old would you say we were when we became aware of what happened to her during the war?

Marianne: We were certainly very young. Maybe four or five. Perhaps younger. We knew that Tante Tine wasn't our real grandmother, that our real grandparents had died in the war. The idea of the holocaust was very frightening. All those people who never came back.

Hester: I remember studying those pictures, in *Life* or *Paris Match*, of the cattle cars, the piles of bones, the gold fillings, the emaciated naked people. I had nightmares about the showers. The worst of it was that they had to take off all their clothes. I couldn't reconcile that with the pictures of our grandmother Hilde, the smiling lady with the heavy hair and the pretty blouses.

Marianne: I had nightmares about the lampshades made of human skin, and the soap . . .

Hester: And yet I had the sense that Mam was shielding us from the worst of it. We had to pry it out of her.

Marianne: Some of it was very vivid, though. The way she felt the night she went into hiding, when she had to unpick the yellow Star of David sewn to her clothes – terrified of leaving any telltale remnants of thread or lint, but so happy to be free . . .

Hester: The stories were sanitised for us, of course. That sort of detail was thrown in to conceal the unspeakable. After that night she never saw her family again.

Marianne: She didn't want us to feel sorry for her. She didn't want us to be afraid. She was always careful to assure us that the same thing would never happen to us.

Hester: Yet all my life, I've been waiting for it to happen. Waiting for the worst.

Marianne: Touch wood. Nothing really bad has happened to us. Yet.

Hester: Perhaps that's what makes me such an optimist. When something bad happens, I refuse to panic. Because I always think, 'This isn't the worst. It could be a lot worse.' So I always see the bright side of things.

Marianne: Like that saying we had tacked to the wall of our room, the one that used to make us laugh, how did it go . . .

Hester: *One day as I sat sad and lonely and without a friend, a voice came to me out of the gloom and said, 'Cheer up, things could be worse.' And so I cheered up, and sure enough, things got worse.*

Marianne: Even back then, in our childish self-centredness, we were aware that somehow she'd missed out. That she was hurt. We wanted to make it up to her.

Hester: Perhaps we felt we had to make up for her loss of

pride in who she was. And for the loss of her father, her grandmother, her favourite brother, her home, her friends. But most of all for the loss of her mother.

Marianne: Yes, that seemed the most terrifying thing of all. You couldn't kiss *that* better.

Hester: Strange – her mother was always such a part of our lives. Even though we never knew her. Not the white-haired granny she might have been had she lived, but Hilde, a woman the same age Mam was then, the same age we are now. It could have been any one of us – this middle-aged, middle-class mother whose life was cut short by a train ride to the gas chambers.

Marianne: Losing my mother was always my worst nightmare.

Hester: Was it? Mine too. I had this recurrent dream when we lived in Zandvoort – I must have been about six or seven years old – of Mam walking purposefully down the street, not looking back, and me running after her, crying, trying to get her to come back. I always woke up from it in a total sweat.

Marianne: Later, when we were teenagers, weren't we somehow aware of how lucky we were to have a mother? I'm sure we felt a need to go easy on her. We thought it was unfair to expect her to understand what this daughter–mother animosity was about – since she herself had been cheated of the chance to rebel against her own mother.

Hester: I don't think it was such a conscious thing on our part. But you're right, I do think we were holding back. We could have been a lot nastier to her.

Marianne: Or perhaps we simply don't remember how nasty we were.

Hester: Meanwhile Hilde was held up to us as a perfect, elegant, serene and wise creature. A being impossible ever to live up to, especially for poor gawky little Edith.

Marianne: I never thought of it that way before. I see it now: Hilde as the mother seen through Edith's eyes while she was still a child, before the realisation that one's parents are not perfect. Mam's relationship with her mother was frozen in time before she could see the flaws.

Hester: She couldn't rebel while she was in hiding with Tante Tine's family, either. When from one day to the next she stopped being Edith and became Nettie, the name on her forged papers. She needed to survive. Survival meant being the good, grateful, helpful girl in her new family, always mindful of the fact that these people who had taken her in were risking their own lives in order to save hers. Turning herself into the servant, the slave, the grateful underdog. When by rights she should have been slamming doors and rolling her eyes and being moody. Like us.

Marianne: And then there was the contrast between the warm, indulgent, artistic Jewish clan she had left behind and this Calvinistic Dutch family, morally righteous and immensely courageous, but cold and undemonstrative.

Hester: As a child I was always a little afraid of Tante Tine. She was like some revered but overly strict headmistress. No hugs, certainly no cuddles.

Marianne: Yet for all these years Mam has played the role of devoted daughter to the woman who saved her life.

Hester: Wouldn't you have done the same thing?

Marianne: Of course I would have. But I think Mam never feels she's done enough. Even after she had Tante Tine honoured in that tree-planting ceremony in Jerusalem, at Yad Vashem.

Hester: I think Tante Tine likes all the accolades, don't you? 'Righteous Gentile' – the name suits her.

Marianne: Yet she's always dourly protested that any 'decent' person would have done the same thing. That it was nothing. That she doesn't need any fuss.

Hester: You can never tell, with Tante Tine. I think that Tine has allowed herself to be defined by Mam's view of her as saviour and hero.

Marianne: But there is also genuine love there, I think. Despite the fact that Mam sometimes breaks out in hives before visiting her.

Hester: I think that it's Mam who needs this relationship most, who needs to pay tribute to her, to honour her for what she did.

Marianne: Yet we're all flying to Holland this summer to celebrate her 100th birthday, aren't we? So she's not the only one who needs to pay tribute.

Hester: I suppose not. But the rest of us are doing it mostly for Mam's sake. Shall I make a confession? I'm waiting for Tine to die, because when she does, I think it will make it easier for Mam to tell her story. There are still so many elements missing, so many things I feel she can't bring herself to talk about.

Marianne: But what I want to know is, why is it so important to us that she finish her story?

Hester: For posterity? So that the people who died will not be forgotten?

Marianne: That's not really the point. It seems to me that we have this great need to feel that she's done with it – to have it be a finished chapter in her life.

Hester: It's as if we are somehow responsible for her.

Marianne: We've *always* felt responsible. Strange – Mam didn't demand it of us, did she?

Hester: No, I think it was Daddy. He used to reprove us for giving her a hard time. He made us feel guilty for disturbing her when she was having one of her headaches. How I remember feeling abandoned, feeling guilty because *we* had nothing to complain about, compared to what *she* had to suffer.

Marianne: Oh yes, those headaches . . .

Hester: Do you remember how it felt when, a few years ago, Tante Tine casually let the bomb drop – 'Oh yes, it was when we got the news that your grandmother had been deported that Edith's headaches first started –'?

Marianne: Was I there? I certainly remember it, but perhaps you told me about it later. God, what a revelation! Everything suddenly fell into place. The dreaded headaches, our tiptoeing around the house, not knowing what to do with ourselves . . .

Hester: Of course we couldn't have associated the headaches with the war, at the time. Is it normal for children to resent their parents' infirmities? Or could it have been this buried link to the past that bothered us so much?

Marianne: I doubt it. I can't believe we could have been conscious of that. Yet I suppose in other ways the past was an important part of who she was.

Hester: Knowing what she had to go through as a child made her a hero to me. I was perversely proud of her – as if her suffering proved that she was better than other children's mothers.

Marianne: It's hard not to romanticise it, for a child.

Hester: Even for an adult! I still sometimes catch myself wallowing in the shivers-down-your-spine tragedy of it.

Marianne: And the adventure of it was appealing too. There were stories we just couldn't get enough of.

Hester: Even though I now realise the stories were doled out to us piecemeal. Never as a complete, chronological narrative. It was always bits and pieces. In a way it was unsatisfying, I wanted her to make sense of it for me, but I couldn't bring myself to ask, in case it got boring – or in case it became too sad – and I'd be obliged to stay and listen . . .

Marianne: It's true – we must have realised that her war was

overwhelmingly tedious and dull most of the time, but the stories *we* wanted to hear were the ones that had action and suspense. Like the day she missed the train and found herself in a strange town after curfew with false identity papers and no place to hide, and she talked that vicar into letting her spend the night sitting in a chair in his parlour, so she wouldn't get picked up by the SS. Or when the German officer was billeted at their house, and Tante Tine decided that Mam should be the one to bring him his morning coffee so he wouldn't get suspect anything . . .

Hester: The wonderful childish revenge fantasies that this Nazi would fall head over heels in love with her, and find out, too late, that the object of his love was a Jew . . . !

Marianne: I realise there's also a certain amount of jealousy on our part. Nothing this exciting has ever happened to us. Do we allow her the romance of her past? It's difficult to acknowledge her central role in another story that doesn't involve us.

Hester: You're right. An ideal mother has no past – certainly nothing exotic – and lives only for her children.

Marianne: An ideal mother has no future, either. All those degrees, and yet she never really found the confidence to pursue a career.

Hester: She must have felt so lonely, after the war. That's why, when Papa gave her an ultimatum – marry me now, woman! – she caved in. Even though she was less than a year or so away from her doctorate.

Marianne: And then she had us. Twins.

Hester: A baby boom! I always felt there was some sort of poetic justice in the fact that the woman lying next to her in the maternity ward in Amsterdam was Miep Gies, Otto Frank's secretary, who had brought the Franks their food while they were in hiding. Miep was *their* Righteous Gentile . . .

Marianne: But, Anne Frank's diary hadn't been published yet, had it?

Hester: I think it had, just. Anyway, Miep and Mam exchanged stories, and when Miep's baby started having trouble nursing, Mam donated *her* surplus breastmilk . . .

Marianne: Breastmilk wasn't rationed, I suppose.

Hester: That story only really started to mean something to me after I'd had Anya. I was looking down at that busy little baby skull at my breast, and I started crying, thinking of Mam's milk for Miep's son, thinking about how perfectly life sometimes works itself out . . .

Marianne: Must have been your hormones. Did you ever tell Mam?

Hester: About being moved that way? Of course not.

Marianne: Anyway, the long and short of it is, Mam got herself knocked up, and it put an end to her dreams of becoming a psychologist.

Hester: It may have been more important to her just then to create a family to replace the one she'd lost, than to be Somebody With A Career.

Marianne: Afterwards, she did have regrets. She was always trying to make up for that unfinished degree by taking more exams, acquiring more qualifications. But she never had the confidence to take a job.

Hester: That's not true. She did have a few jobs. But they were half-hearted, part-time. I think it was partly because she has always had problems with the validity of her profession – I think she trusts her instincts more than the teachings she's supposed to follow as a psychologist.

Marianne: But it was also because she was never able to put her work first, before her role as a corporate wife.

Hester: And that's why, when it was our turn, it seemed so important to finish our studies and establish our careers, before getting married and having babies.

Marianne: We thought we should learn from her mistakes.

Hester: Do you think we did? Do you think our way was better?

Marianne: Probably not. I feel I'll never live up to her as a mother. Still, her inability to get somewhere in her career is one of the only things about Mam that we've ever allowed ourselves to criticise.

Hester: Well, I'm glad we found something to be critical of, at least. When I listen to my friends, one of the things that strikes me is that they can have such angry things to say about their mothers.

Marianne: They say that as you get older, you become afraid of turning into your own mother. Perhaps that's why they're angry.

Hester: Are you afraid of that?

Marianne: No. I don't think I'd mind – turning into Mam, I mean. She has dignity. She still sets standards for us to emulate. She still has better legs, too.

Hester: I agree, but now *you're* doing it.

Marianne: Doing what?

Hester: Being protective of her. Turning it into a tribute.

Marianne: Sorry.

Hester: See? We can't help ourselves.

Marianne: I think that's what our relationship with her is about – mutually protective – mutually appreciative. I don't think we ever truly rebelled against her, just as she never truly rebelled against her mother.

Hester: What about Jessica? She didn't hold back.

Marianne: Well, Jessica was born six years after us – more than ten years after the end of the war. She never had that sense of obligation. Our little sister definitely had a more classic adolescence. She's much more judgemental than we are.

Hester: You see? If anyone's going to write about Mam, it's

got to be you or me. Imagine what Jessie would make of it!

Marianne: Jessica's reality is different from our reality. What do we know, anyway, about Mam? Where does *her* reality fit into all this?

Hester: Ask her.

Marianne: And make her put into a few words something that has taken me a lifetime to figure out? I know I probably wouldn't agree with her anyway. What's important is how *I* see her, I guess.

Hester: Or how *we* see her. But I do think you're getting somewhere. You really ought to try and write that piece.

Marianne: I still don't think I can do it by myself.

Hester: Nobody said you had to.