

Playing for Their Lives

Victoria

The Bed Wetter



Dorothy Singer

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VICTORIA, THE BED WETTER

Sibling Rivalry and Learning to Love

Mr. and Mrs. Thornton: The Battle Begins

“We have a bright, sensitive child who doesn’t feel good about herself, who tells me that she’s ugly and that no one loves her.” These were Paula Thornton’s words to me at the beginning of our first interview. The Thorntons were a high-powered couple: she was the chief graphic designer for a large firm located in New York City; he was a senior engineer in a nationally known company in Connecticut. They had moved here from New York three months before this session.

As Paula Thornton explained, “I could not give up my job when Neil accepted his new position here. There just wasn’t the same kind of opportunity available for me anywhere in Connecticut, nothing that paid as well or was as prestigious. So we decided that I would be the commuter. I get a lot of work done on the train, but I know it’s hard on the kids—and maybe even on Neil.”

Paula glanced at Neil; he remained quiet and averted his eyes. The Thorntons were a handsome couple. Paula was tall, brunette, always elegantly and expensively dressed, and meticulous about her makeup and hair style. Neil was a lanky, sandy-haired man, usually wearing tweeds, button-down shirts, and horn-rimmed glasses, and looking very much like the stereotypical professor. Both were well educated and had advanced degrees.

In addition to Victoria, who was seven years old when her therapy began, the Thorntons had one other daughter, Katherine, a “sweet, friendly, outgoing four-year-old” who, according to Paula, “adores her big sister, but Victoria hates Katherine. That’s the problem in a nutshell. Victoria comes to me crying and says, ‘Why was I born?’ This drives me crazy. I want the girls to be friends, but Victoria can be mean, even cruel, to Katherine. I have found welts on Katherine’s shoulders, teeth marks on her arms, scratches on her face. I’m beside myself. What can we do? Katherine does tease Victoria—I admit that—but Victoria’s behavior isn’t normal, is it? I bought a book, *Siblings without Rivalry*, thinking I would read it

and it would help. No, sir. It didn't help me. Victoria has even been in therapy in New York for a year. We stopped when we moved to Connecticut. The doctor said she'll outgrow her jealousy. Well, we've been here for three months, and it's worse!"

Neil interjected, "Look, Paula, maybe Vicki is reacting to our move and the new neighborhood and to your commute—"

Paula jumped in before Neil could finish his sentence: "Oh, so now it's me, is it? I was waiting for you to say it's my fault. Right, I'm not home enough. Right, I'm to blame. Right? I thought I did a pretty good job preparing the children for this move. What did you do?"

"Wait," I said. "Let's just go slowly and focus on Victoria right now. I need to know more about her if I am going to help her. We'll touch on other issues as they pertain to Victoria in future sessions, but for now, just try to tell me about your child. Mr. Thornton, can you give me your impressions of Victoria? By the way, do you call her Victoria or Vicki?"

The Thorntons simultaneously shouted their preference, Paula favoring the more formal "Victoria."

"Suppose, I let your daughter make the choice when we meet. Is that agreeable?"

They nodded their consent, and Neil picked up on the move to Connecticut: "I was nervous about this move. Vicki, as Paula said, is a sensitive child; she seems depressed now, and I'm worried. She told my sister that she wants to commit suicide. That's one of the reasons we called you. That doesn't seem like a normal idea for a seven-year-old, does it?"

Neil spoke slowly, painfully. He was guarded and uncomfortable, kept his eyes averted, and often deferred to Paula to fill in the information about school, everyday reactions, Vicki's friends, her early childhood, and even her relationship with Katherine. Although he seemed like a caring parent, it was clear that most of the day-to-day household concerns were left to Paula. Neil appeared to be preoccupied by other thoughts, somewhat distant, and yet troubled by Vicki's behavior. He pressed his question: "Suicide isn't what kids of seven talk about, is it?"

I agreed that it isn't generally a part of such young children's conversations, but that children do

pick up on things that they hear or that they see on television. I added, “I won’t dismiss what she said, but I need to know more about her.”

Paula interrupted, “Well, that’s what I thought: maybe she gets her ideas from television. You know Victoria and Katherine have a nanny, Sylvie, who’s been with us since Victoria was born. I’ve asked her about this, and she swears she’s never mentioned the word *suicide*. She also tells me that she doesn’t watch the ‘soaps’ when the children are around. I try to believe her. I did think maybe Victoria heard about suicide on the soaps. You see, Victoria is dramatic; she has a flair for exaggeration and hyperbole. I really couldn’t take the statement about suicide seriously. I do worry more about her lack of self-esteem, her anger toward Katherine—and one more thing we need to tell you about: she’s a bed wetter.”

Paula lowered her voice as she told me this and began to fidget with her purse, opening and closing the catch. Clearly, Paula was ashamed and uncomfortable about this revelation. Victoria was an embarrassment to her. Paula’s behavior indicated that she felt she was a less-than-perfect mother: How could she, so meticulous, so organized, so good at her profession, have raised a child who caused her so much distress? I also suspected that Paula harbored guilt feelings about her role as a mother. True, she was angry that something now interfered with the smooth routine of her household but, even more, with the image she wanted to convey to the outside world: Paula could do it all—have the perfect marriage, hold the perfect job, and raise perfect children. There would be time later in our parents’ meetings to explore Paula’s feelings about Victoria: the disappointment in her child, her own feelings of guilt about being away from home so much, and her attitudes toward motherhood. This was not the time to examine *Paula’s* feelings. I needed to know more about Victoria and the enuresis (bed-wetting), as well as this child’s other problems.

The Thorntons assured me that Victoria’s enuresis did not have any physical basis. The wetting had begun when Katherine was born.

“It seemed to me,” said Paula, “that it was her way of taunting me—getting even, as it were. I would go into her room in the morning and find Victoria in a ‘bed’ on the floor, lying on her pillow or blankets. She had been completely trained at two years and three months, so I was sure this was regression, or a bid for attention. I tried to give more time to Victoria. We all did: Neil, Sylvie, my family. It was no good.

She wets every night, and this has been going on since she was three. Once in a while, she's dry, but rarely. Sylvie covers up for her, I know, and strips the bed very early, but I smell the sheets. What's worse now is that Katherine is trained and she teases Victoria. No matter what I say to Victoria, or what I promise her, or how many times I try to praise her for other things, she still wets. Her therapist in New York said she would outgrow this, too. Well, we've seen no change, and if anything, the move and my commute have only exacerbated the problem. But I won't stop working. I tried that once before, and I was miserable. I really was a witch when I stayed home for that six months. I have to admit it: I'm just not the mothering type."

"Tell me more about the therapist in New York," I said. "Why was Victoria in therapy?"

"Well," Neil said, "Victoria has been depressed for a long time. Her schoolwork is suffering, too. She hasn't been reading well, not like the kids in her class. Also, she has no real friends as far as we can make out. At her birthday party when she turned seven, we had her class come over, that is, all the girls. I thought it was good, but

Vicki cried all night. She said she had no special friend and no one really liked her. I think, too, the jealousy of Katherine is out of hand. I think she's just a needy child."

"Yes, that's right," added Paula. "No matter how much time I give Victoria, it's not enough. We're both worried about her and her behavior toward Katherine. I've had Victoria examined by the best specialists in New York. The enuresis is psychological, I'm sure. She's at an age when she wants to sleep over at a friend's house, but she won't: she's so afraid she'll wet the bed. She's having a rough time adjusting to school, and she's so awkward and ungainly. The school psychologist gave me your name. Really, we're at our wits' end. But you have to know, I just can't quit my job. I just can't."

Our session was drawing to a close. I arranged a time when Sylvie would be able to drive Victoria to my office. The Thorntons seemed reluctant to leave. I felt that more than Victoria troubled them, but I had to be patient.

Just before they left, Paula blurted out, "Look, all I want you to do is help Victoria to be dry at night and to stop beating-up on Katherine. I told Victoria that she doesn't have to love Katherine, just not hit or

bite her.”

“Do you really mean that?” I asked. “That you don’t care if Victoria loves Katherine?”

Paula looked at me surprised and then became teary-eyed: “No, no, of course not. I want them to love each other. I need them to love each other. Help me! Help Victoria!”

Paula was more “human” and more vulnerable than she would admit to, and I felt that I could work with her and Neil. I felt, too, that her “need” for the children to love each other would be proof to everyone that she was the “good” mother. Victoria’s lack of self-esteem might be a reflection, perhaps, of Paula’s own uncertainty about her worth as a mother, which she had managed to compensate for with her career success. It was clear, too, that Paula wanted me to know that her career was important, and that she was not going to give it up because of any therapy recommendations for Victoria. Neil’s personality eluded me. It would take time before I could clearly understand his role in Victoria’s life.

The Thorntons left, and I looked forward to my meeting with Victoria.

Victoria’s World

Might we not say that every
child at play behaves like a
creative writer, in that he creates
a world of his own, or rather rearranges
things of his world in a new way
that pleases him? It would be
wrong to think that he does not
take the world seriously; on the
contrary, he takes his play very
seriously and he expends large
amounts of emotion on it.

—Sigmund Freud, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming”

Sylvie drove Victoria to her first session and agreed to remain in the waiting room with Katherine until the hour was over. I felt it was important for Victoria to know that Sylvie was close by if she needed her for reassurance. Vicki was chubby, physically unlike her slender parents. She had fiery red hair cut in short curls, reminding me of Little Orphan Annie. Her face was covered with freckles, and she had

dimples when she smiled. After a few minutes with Victoria, I found her to be a child who managed to be comfortable in the presence of adults and who seemed quite self-assured.

She told me right out that the *only one*—and this was accented, the *only one*—who called her Victoria was her mother. “So,” she said, “call me Vicki.”

- I was so excited to come, I was also curious!
- I was curious, too, Vicki, curious about what you looked like, and about what you would like to play with.

Like the serious child Freud described, Vicki gradually invited me through her play to share a picture of her world at school and at home. She surveyed the playroom, listened very seriously to my rules and explanations about who I was and what we would do, and then asked if we could play “camping.”

- First, I have to learn you a lesson—learn you all about camping. I’ll show you exactly what to do.
- Do you mean you have to teach me about camping?
- Yes, of course. We have to pack lots of stuff and make a safe tent.

I watched Vicki take the blanket and place it over the table to make a tent. She knew just what she was about. I thought to myself, “Great, a good player, good imagination. This should be easy!”

- Now, let’s see. Who goes into the tent? This doll. We’ll call her Susy. And this doll. We’ll call her Patty. OK, some dishes, some food. Can I make food from the Play-Doh?
- Yes, of course.
- Do you go camping with your parents?
- [*molding the clay*]: Never. Never. But I want to. OK, now you be the ranger. You come and check on us when we sleep. Make sure no wild bears are there. Use a ranger voice.

And I played the camping game with Vicki, letting her lead the way and set the theme. Her story generally followed the same pattern. Everyone ate dinner, went to sleep, and was awakened by a wild

bear. The ranger (my role) came to the rescue and chased the bear away. We would then start the game all over again.

I made no interpretations this first session, although it seemed to me that Vicki was trying to master some fear of harm or danger, or perhaps she had experienced some nightmare that she wanted to work out through play. Then again, was this game just an imitation of a story she had seen on TV or had read in school? I participated in her game but was cautious, observant, and puzzled, and I wondered if I had been made the ranger to save Vicki in real life.

Vicki played “camping” for almost the entire session, and then, when told that our time was just about up, she carefully put everything away and came back to the table.

- That was a good game. I like it here.
- I’m glad you like it here. You can come back in two days, and we can play camping again if you wish.
- I’ll see, I’ll see.

Vicki wasn’t so sure that she was going to follow my suggestion. “I’ll see” was her way of telling me that she would determine what game she wanted to play, that she wanted to be in control. I thought about control: Was this one reason for the enuresis, a need to control her mother? Certainly, very little had been under Vicki’s control, from the birth of Katherine to the current uprootedness from her home and school in New York. But for now, our time was up.

Vicki ran into the room where Sylvie and Katherine had been waiting. Katherine showed Vicki her coloring book, but Vicki ignored her, threw her arms around Sylvie, and told her that she had had “fun.” Katherine told me that she was four and that she went to school. She was a dark-haired, slim, pretty child who appeared gentle and unassuming. Vicki seemed annoyed by Katherine’s conversation with me.

I bid them good-bye and made a note that it would be best if Sylvie could arrange for some playtime with Katherine while Vicki had her sessions with me. It seemed important that Vicki, at this time, early in our sessions, have no rivals in my office, so that it would clearly be her special place. As it turned out, she was able to separate from Sylvie so easily that Sylvie would just drop her off for the session and return

when our time was up. This arrangement pleased both Vicki and Sylvie, who told me that it gave her some time with Katherine, to read to her or color or draw. In Sylvie's words, "It is so peaceful."

Sylvie, who had been the children's "surrogate" mother for the past seven years, was from Mexico, and her English was heavily accented. She was loving, caring, and conscientious but showed little psychological insight. She spoiled the children—indulging them, as I learned—and just as she liked to eat, she allowed Vicki to eat between meals and to snack on cookies or muffins. Katherine had a poor appetite, but Vicki was usually ravenous—and her chubbiness attested to her love of food. I wondered if Vicki's need to eat was a way of seeking gratification, a substitute perhaps for the attention she craved so much from her mother, and I suspected that a chubby Victoria was an additional embarrassment to Paula, who was elegant and slender. A fat child would upset Paula's image of the "magazine family" she envisioned for herself.

The Family

Two days later, Vicki came bounding into the playroom.

- No camping today.
- Why not?
- Well, I think the tent fell down in a storm. The children died, and no one ever found them.

I worried about this and wondered about the possibility of some suicidal rumination.

- That's a sad story. Do you think we could make another tent and try another story?
- I don't think so.
- Would you like to draw today?
- OK, what?
- I'd like you to draw your family. Can you do that?
- Sure. Let's see, I need your pencils and crayons—lots of crayons.

I gave her paper, pencils, and crayons, and she began to draw. The first thing she drew was her cat.

- In my family there is a mother, a father, a sister, and a cat. My cat is Snowball 'cause she's white. I'll give my mother red hair. It's not really red, but I'll make it red. Daddy has light brown hair. I'll use the tan crayon. Katherine is four. I'll draw her over here, way over here, way by herself.
- Mm, isn't she lonely by herself, far from Mommy, Daddy, and Snowball?
- Well, that's just where she is. Right there, that's all.

And that was all. Vicki shut me out.

- Where are you in the picture?
- I'm not here.
- I see. Aren't you part of this family?

No answer from Vicki. Again she shut me out. She just continued to draw and added details to the figures: "Done! Let's tack it up. May I draw my new house and my car? We have a car now. We didn't need one in New York."

Vicki and I tacked the two drawings up on the bulletin board. There was no Vicki in her family picture, and Katherine was drawn far away from the parents, near the top of the page. Did Vicki feel left out? And why had she colored Paula's hair bright red? Was she trying to identify with Paula, the mother she needed so much? Why had she drawn Katherine so far away from the parents? Through this drawing, Vicki was trying to tell me how she felt about her family; she was not ready to tell me in words. This was only our second session, and I would be patient.

After Vicki finished her drawings, she went over to the dollhouse and carefully examined each figure. She then rearranged all the furniture "to look like my house." I watched as she made a living room, bedrooms, a kitchen, and a playroom. Vicki placed a doll in the kitchen at the stove "cooking."

- Daddy went to work. He left early. Mommy is cooking breakfast, and all the children are sleeping upstairs. There are four little girls. The dog and cat sleep under the bed. Everyone smells the food, and they come downstairs to eat. Mommy won't let this one

eat. This one is fat. Watch this: Mommy knocks her off the chair. Down she goes. She wants to eat cake. “No cake for you. You’re fat!”

- My, how does that little girl feel?
- She’s mad, real mad, and so she yells at Mommy, but Mommy says, “Go to bed, you bad, bad girl. Go upstairs and stay there.”

Vicki put the little doll back in the bed and repeated the game with lots of spirit and glee, making the “knockdown” scene more exaggerated and more dramatic each time. The mother’s voice became louder and more angry. When Vicki seemed to be losing control, I intervened and urged her to find what else the mother and the child could do to solve this dilemma about the cake.

Vicki look puzzled and then said:

- Mommy cuts a small piece for the kid. That’s all right, to have a treat once a week, isn’t it?
- Yes, that’s a great idea, a small piece of cake once a week. Do you ever have such a treat?

Vicki admitted that she “loved to eat,” and that her parents tried to control her food habits. Her mother wanted her to look “nice in a bathing suit” so no one would call her fat or chubby.

“I’m trying real hard, but I’m hungry so much,” she said.

Another problem of Vicki’s had been uncovered. It appeared that there was some hassle over food in the Thornton household. I made a note to bring this up in our next parents’ session. There were numerous issues to deal with: Vicki’s school problems, the enuresis, the sibling rivalry, her feelings of rejection and poor self-esteem, the depression, and her sense of not fitting into this perfect family, where each one was slim, attractive, and successful. Vicki was angry—at Katherine, at her mother, and at herself—and she seemed willing to talk about some of her problems.

Before our next session, I asked myself many questions. Was it possible for Vicki to live up to her mother’s expectations? How could Paula and Vicki spend more time together? How much time did Neil spend with the children? How was Paula handling the rivalry between the children? Did Vicki think that she could control Paula through the enuresis? Was the enuresis an act of hostility toward Paula? I felt

that I could try being more direct with Vicki. She had experienced a year of therapy before our contact, and her play seemed to be an enactment of her conflicts with her family. I was sure that the year of therapy had paved the way for what emerged in our third session.

Session Three: Vicki's Disclosure

At our next session, I decided to ask Vicki why she thought she was coming to see me. She was so forthright in her reply that for a moment I was taken aback:

I do have problems. The worst problem I ever had—and it's embarrassing. I'm doing OK, but last night I peed in my bed. I do it a tiny bit now. When I was five and six, I did it a lot. When I pee, I go on the floor to sleep, or in Katherine's bed. She lets me. One night, I went to her bed, but she played and kept me up. So I sleep on my pillow on the floor. My mom is too tired to change the sheets. Sometimes I take the sheets off and put them in the closet. I feel bad about this."

Vicki told me all this in a sad voice, and it was obvious that she was deeply troubled by her inability to stay dry all night. After she told me about making her "bed" on the floor, Vicki became very quiet and put her head down on the table.

- You feel bad about wetting the bed, Vicki.
- Yes, I feel bad and embarrassed, but I can't stop. But I want to stop. I sleep so deep that I don't even know that I have to go to the bathroom until I feel it all wet. Sometimes, I don't even get up until morning, and then I find out that I'm all wet—and smelly.
- Well, we can begin to work on this. I think there is a way we can help you. I'll talk to your parents about what we can do.
- On my birthday, last year when I was six, I went to Pamela's house for a sleepover. I slept over and had fun. I said, "God, don't let me wet," and it was like magic. I didn't wet!
- That's wonderful. So sometimes you can be dry.
- Not often, and maybe when I'm not home near Katherine.
- You think Katherine has something to do with your wetting?

- Sometimes I hate my sister so much. What I'm upset about is how my parents think I start the trouble, 'cause they think Katherine is an angel and I'm older and I should know better. But Katherine is sneaky. She teases me, takes my things, and runs away. Even Sylvie says to leave Katherine alone when she's mean to me. Sylvie makes me give my toys to Katherine. That's not fair.
- No, that doesn't seem fair, but maybe you can share some toys with Katherine.
- I hate her. She calls me "pee-pee." It makes me feel like I'm two or three years old. It makes me feel like a baby. When I wet I feel like a baby, like I can't control myself.
- It's not a good feeling.

Vicki started to cry as she poured her heart out. She wiped her eyes and then asked me if she could be "cured."

Vicki, I answered, "there are some things we can do to help you. I'll see your parents next week, and we'll start a plan for you. Let me talk to them first, and then I'll share the plan with you, OK?"

This seemed to comfort Vicki. She dried her tears and asked if we had any "leftover time."

- Yes, we have some time left.
- Good, I'll play camping.

Vicki rearranged the table to form her "tent" and once again put the dolls inside.

- Everyone comes to life again—Susy, Patty.
- How did they come to life again, Vicki?
- They came to life cause the ranger gave them magic.
- What kind of magic?
- He said magic words.
- Can you say them out loud?
- No, the magic words are my secret.

I watched Vicki feed the dolls and tuck them into bed. She took the toy bear and put him near the dolls.

- The bear has made friends with the girls. Look, he's sleeping, too.
- Well, it looks as if the bear isn't wild anymore. How come?
- This bear is the good one. The wild one is still out there, waiting, waiting, waiting.
- Waiting for what?
- We'll see!

Our time was up, but the session had been a revealing one. Vicki had shared her embarrassment and pain with me about the enuresis.

The relief had allowed her to play her game and revive the dolls. Were the magic words my plans to try to "cure" Vicki? Were Susy and Patty the two sisters who might possibly become friends and sleep peaceably with each other? However, all was still not safe in the tent. The "wild bear" still lurked out there, and I wondered who it could be.

Vicki was obviously greatly troubled by her inability to remain continent during the night, and it was clear that Katherine's teasing only exacerbated her humiliation.

Enuresis is characterized by repeated, involuntary discharges of urine into the bed by a child aged four or older. Most bed wetters wet several nights a week, or even every night, as Vicki did. A child who occasionally wets is not considered enuretic. Vicki was a "discontinuous bed wetter, that is, a child who had been toilet-trained, was dry for three years, and then after Katherine's birth, began bedwetting; Vicki was jealous and had regressed. She wanted her mother's attention, and bed-wetting was certainly one way to get it.

As many as one out of every four children between the ages of four and sixteen is enuretic, and more boys than girls are bed wetters. About 12 percent of children six to eight years old wet the bed, and some children wet during the day, usually when excited or busily engaged in play. Fortunately, Vicki

was not a diurnal (daytime) wetter.

Discontinuous wetting such as Vicki's often appears when a child is under some external stress or is in an emotional crisis that creates anxiety, such as a physical illness, a family move, or, as in Vicki's case, the birth of a sibling. I was certain that Katherine's birth had been instrumental because of Vicki's conversation with me during this session. What puzzled me was why the enuresis continued. It is not unusual for an older sibling to regress when a new baby enters the picture, but Vicki had continued the enuresis over a long period. Were the parents favoring Katherine over Vicki? According to the Thorntons, Katherine was the "easy baby," who did "everything as the books said, right on schedule." Perhaps the Thorntons were not very subtle in their expressions of preference for Katherine. I planned to address this issue in a session with the Thorntons. Meanwhile, my task was to suggest a plan to them for controlling the enuresis. At the same time, it would be important to help Vicki deal with her angry feelings toward Katherine and Paula.

The Plan

The sessions that followed Vicki's "revelation" to me of her enuresis were a repeat of the "camping" and "food" games. She alternated between the "wild bear" that "killed" the children and the "gentle bear" that slept with them and became a "friend." The food game was a simple, repetitive story of a child who wanted to eat and was knocked off the chair by a scolding mother. Vicki was playing out her conflicts about her mother and her sister. Mother could be wild or gentle; sisters could be angry or share a bed. Death and revival seemed to be an expression both of Vicki's self-hate and of her desire to be a healthy, joyous child. There was much to share with the Thorntons, but it seemed to me that the first priority was the enuresis.

Although I was concerned about Vicki's making the statement to her aunt about suicide, it had happened only once. In general, she did not seem to fit the classic picture of a suicidal child. Some researchers have argued that children under the age of ten cannot be called suicidal because they do not appreciate the finality of death. Others have found that very young children do indeed exhibit suicidal behavior even though they do not necessarily believe that death is final. When children have some concept of death and its meaning, and when they see it as a solution to overwhelming emotional

problems and a stressful existence, they may be considered suicidal, especially if they manifest certain behavior. Cynthia Pfeffer, a leading researcher in this area, stated that suicidal behavior in children is any self-destructive behavior that they *intend* to hurt themselves seriously or to cause their death. Pfeffer outlined a spectrum of severity: nonsuicidal behavior, suicidal ideas, suicidal threats, mild suicidal attempts, serious suicidal attempts, and, ultimately, suicide.

Vicki's play reflected an outsider, the "wild bear" that harmed the dolls, rather than any intention to harm herself. But I still needed to be alert for other indications that she might be harboring self-destructive thoughts. I decided first, however, to concentrate on helping her with the enuresis. This particular problem was a major cause of her discomfort, self-hate, and, of course, embarrassment with regard to Katherine, the younger sister, who was completely dry at night.

The Thorntons came for their second meeting with me eager to hear my opinions on Vicki's emotional difficulties. I told them of her frankness about the enuresis and how eager she was for a "cure." Several of the suggestions that I made the Thorntons told me they had already tried: they had kept "star charts" rewarding Vicki for dry nights; they had tried to stop all liquid intake after six o'clock in the evening; they had awakened Vicki at about eleven o'clock and taken her to the bathroom; they had required Vicki to change her own sheets in the morning; and they had tried to reduce stress before bedtime by having a quiet time before Vicki went to sleep.

"We have tried everything in the book," Paula said. "Nothing works. We think we're OK for a few days, and then bingo! she's at it again."

"I think it's just the perpetual stress in our home," added Neil. "It's just our way of life—and maybe just Vicki's own constitutional makeup. Katherine doesn't seem to be affected by our two-career family—at least not yet."

"Well," I said, "I do have a plan for you. It's different and may sound extreme. But it works in about 70 percent of cases, and I think it's worth a try. Remember your psychology classes? Well, this is a form of conditioning. It's a special apparatus: a bell-and-pad device. When it's moistened, the pad closes an electrical circuit, which rings a bell and turns on a light. There are some variations on this device. For example, there's an electric alarm that attaches to the shoulder and connects to a small sensor that snaps

onto the underwear. This device has no pad and is absolutely shockproof. A drop of moisture sounds the alarm and awakens the child. Soon, Vicki will learn to inhibit urination during her sleep by recognizing her own body signals. Then you can remove the apparatus.”

“God, it sounds like training a dog,” Paula said. “I’m not crazy about this idea.”

“Paula, it’s worth a try; give it a chance. You’ve tried everything else, and as you and Neil said, nothing worked. You can buy this device through a catalog I have. Please think about it. If you are willing, I’ll talk to Vicki and prepare her. You’ll have to continue with the control of liquids and even continue to wake her up before you go to bed to allow her to urinate. Keep a record, too, of the times when the bell rings, so that you know when her bed-wetting typically occurs. I would keep up a ‘star chart,’ too, so that Vicki can see her rewards. Gradually, in two to three months, Vicki should be dry at night.”

The Thorntons said they would try this method: they didn’t need to think about it. I was pleased and gave them the information about the supplier and I told them I’d discuss the plan with Vicki at our next session.

We spent the remainder of this parents’ session talking about how both Neil and Paula could offer quality time separately to Vicki and to Katherine. It was important for the Thorntons to recognize that Vicki was indeed jealous of Katherine and often felt rejected by her parents. I described the picture that Vicki had drawn of the family. They were not surprised; they had been aware of Vicki’s jealousy of Katherine since her birth. What did distress them was Vicki’s elimination of herself from the family picture.

Paula again asked, “Does this mean that Victoria is thinking of suicide?”

“No,” I replied, “I don’t think it means that, but it does suggest that she feels as if she doesn’t fit in. She wants to very much, and the fact that she gives you red hair, Paula, tells me that she very much wants the two of you to be alike and close. Perhaps you can ease up on her for now about her weight. Let’s just concentrate on one thing at a time. Right now, it’s the enuresis. Of course, I will be alert for any signs of self-destruction, but I think that isn’t the crucial issue now.”

The Thorntons left. They had at least seemed receptive to the plan for the enuresis. I had also asked them to alert me if they noticed any behavior or words on Vicki's part that suggested self-destructive tendencies.

At our next meeting time, Vicki came in eating a cheese sandwich and carrying a bottle of juice. She put her food on the table and told me that she had had a "bad couple of days." Katherine had stolen her toy lipstick and dress-up kit, and Sylvie "didn't do anything about it," so Vicki had hit Katherine very hard until she cried. Sylvie had scolded Vicki and sent her to her room. Later, Sylvie believed Vicki when she "found the stuff under Katherine's bed."

- I guess you felt angry that you were scolded.
- Yes, but I'm always to blame. I hate Katherine so much. She pulls my hair when I don't look. She's a sneak.
- Can you tell Sylvie when Katherine is mean to you instead of hitting Katherine?
- That's no good. She won't believe me. Even when she does, she says Katherine is little and I'm supposed to know better.
- Would you like to play Sylvie and Katherine with me?
- What do you mean?
- Well, I'll be you, and you be Katherine. We'll let Katherine pull my hair. I won't hit her, but I'll call Sylvie. Then you can be Sylvie and come to find out what's wrong.
- Well, I'll try, but in real life Sylvie doesn't come—and when she comes, she doesn't help.
- But, Vicki, we can still do our play and find out what to do next if Sylvie doesn't help.

Vicki and I role-played the hair-pulling skit with many variations on what Sylvie could do. My emphasis was on using discussion, not physical attacks. Vicki liked this game and decided to act it out with the dolls. I knew that solving the problem with Katherine would take time, but at least Vicki was receptive to the role playing.

Once Vicki had settled down and seemed to have satisfied her need to vent her anger toward

Katherine, I told her about our plan for the pad and bell. I described exactly how it would work.

- I wet last night. I think I drank too much juice, too. I also wet at Grandma's house on Saturday night. It was so embarrassing. I do want a bell. We'll pay for it!
- Vicki, I'm glad you want to try this plan. Mommy and Daddy have agreed to buy a pad and bell for you. I think it will work. But remember, no juice, water, or milk after six. Can you do that?
- I can try.
- Trying is important. That's a start.

Vicki's Love Boxes

A month after Vicki began using the apparatus, she still had two or three accidents a week, and she seemed discouraged. I gave her support and encouragement, explaining that it would take time. The Thorntons were cooperating by keeping a chart for Vicki, by limiting her liquid intake in the evenings, and by monitoring her bathroom habits, so that they were beginning to get a sense of when Vicki wet. It was generally toward morning—about 4:00 A.M.

Vicki told me that she felt "things were not fair." She called the pad and bell her "device" and was "ashamed" to tell her grandparents about it: "Katherine doesn't need a device, and I feel freaky wearing it." We spent some time discussing Vicki's feelings about her "shame," weighing the good feelings about the dry nights against her feelings of embarrassment and the teasings of Katherine on the wet nights. I did ask the Thorntons to discuss Katherine's teasing with her, and the teasing began to subside.

Paula also began to give Vicki some "special time." One Saturday, for example, she took Vicki to lunch and to the local museum while Neil and Katherine stayed home. This treat was extremely important to Vicki, and it seemed like such a simple thing for Paula to do that I was surprised she had never done it before.

As Paula explained over the phone, "I thought that I had to give the girls equal time, and that if I separated them for a treat, each would be jealous. I guess by giving each one a turn, it is more special. I

must admit that I was enjoying myself with Victoria alone. I didn't have the bickering in the car or the teasing that I see between them when we are all together."

Paula then revealed some information about her own childhood: "I was an only child raised by my mom; my dad died when I was eight. My mom didn't care much about how our house looked, and I hated that. I knew that when I grew up, I would be different. I wanted things to look just so, like the houses on television. I guess my mom didn't teach me much either about how to raise kids. I think I do my best, but I never had a good, close mother-daughter relationship while I was a child. I think I'm a little scared by it. I read a lot, but I guess that's not the same as experiencing what it's like to have a mother who does all the mothering things. I sometimes feel as if I'm not equipped to be a mother. I'm trying so hard now, but it still doesn't feel right. My job feels right. I have no trepidation when I'm in the business world. How I wish I could do it all! Maybe in keeping a meticulous home, I've shortchanged my children."

This was an important insight for Paula, and I told her so. I encouraged her in her attempts to interact more with Vicki and also to continue to give Vicki the special times alone, without Katherine.

During our therapy sessions, Vicki enjoyed role-playing family incidents. Each squabble with Katherine was playacted and resolved. We played Vicki's favorite scenes: Katherine jumping on Vicki's bed; Katherine coming into Vicki's room and turning off Vicki's TV; Katherine "stealing" Vicki's toys, favorite candy, and jewelry. In each one of these vignettes, Katherine was the heavy, and Vicki was the victim. Vicki took Sylvie's role and doled out severe punishments for Katherine, such as "two weeks with no friends over," "Katherine's best toys thrown in the garbage," "no dessert," "no TV," "no bedtime stories," and "no 'alone time' with Mommy."

We reversed roles so that Vicki could begin to think of ways to handle Katherine other than by physical attacks. Her severe punishments were her alternatives. I wanted these to subside.

- Speak to my parents, Dorothy, tell them how to handle Katherine. They keep telling me to settle things myself, but they don't like how I settle things.
- Maybe you can think of some better ways to settle things with Katherine. Can we make a list of some ideas?

- I could try.
- Let's write some down.

We began our list of ideas. I wanted Vicki to think of less punitive remedies than the ones she used in her play. Gradually, Vicki began to think of some solutions.

- I can give Katherine "special time" like my mom gives me.
- Vicki, that's great. Maybe that's why Katherine bothers you so much. Maybe she just wants to be with you but doesn't quite know how to be with you in a nice way. Could you show her?
- I could, but what if she's still mean to me?
- That's a chance you have to take. If she's still mean, you can tell her that your special time won't take place. But remember, your special time will mean sharing some of your things with her.
- I hate that!
- I know you're not too keen on sharing with her, but look at all the fights you have trying to keep her away from you.
- Dorothy, you know that she is my chief botherer.
- I know that you feel angry at Katherine lots of times, but sometimes you do like to play with her. You told me that.
- I like it if she's good and doesn't tease. When she teases me, I feel sad, and when everyone takes her side, I feel sad, too, like I have no love box.
- What do you mean?
- I'll show you.

Vicki took the crayons and the drawing pad and drew her family again. Each person was drawn inside a box—a "love box." Vicki also drew herself this time. The drawing was of a tiny girl in a corner of the page. No "love box" protected her, whereas everyone else, even Snowball the cat, was safely tucked into a box. This drawing reminded me of a child I had worked with years before, who had drawn her

family with large hearts and left herself heartless and empty, no “heart place.” Vicki felt like that child, unloved and alone.

- This is a sad picture of you, Vicki.
- I feel like everyone laughs at me. My mom laughs, my dad, Katherine, even Sylvie, 'cause I'm so different. I'm big and I wet and I'm fat and I'm ugly and clumsy. I hate myself. I want to be Miss Perfect.

Vicki burst into tears, and although I tried to comfort her, at first she would not listen to my words: “You feel very sad, Vicki, as if everything is wrong with you. But look at the progress you're making. You're starting to keep dry. You've had fun with your mom, and even Katherine has been nicer to you.”

Vicki peeked at me from above her wads of Kleenex, and her crying began to stop. We sat quietly. Vicki asked me not to tack this picture up, but to save it. I suggested that she draw another picture—of something that made her feel good. I didn't want this session to end with so much negative feeling.

Vicki dried her tears and drew a large pink dog with one large spot on its face. She drew small lines on either side of its tail to show “wagging.”

- This is the dog I wish I had, but with Snowball around, we can't have a dog.
- He's lovely. Can we hang up this dog?
- Yes. I'll think of a name next time.

Vicki left feeling somewhat better.

I was eager to speak to the Thorntons. Vicki had expressed a very deep feeling of rejection and a very poor self-concept. Despite the small gains so far in her therapy, there was much to do.

The Thorntons and Their Rivalry

When the Thorntons next came to see me, Paula and Neil revealed to me that they were having marital difficulties. They were willing to seek help, and I gave them the name of a marriage therapist.

The main issue was Paula's job. She had just been given a promotion to the vice-presidency of her firm. This meant some additional traveling around the country, late-night meetings, and "tons of work" on weekends. Her salary had been increased significantly, she said, "More than Neil's"

Neil was visibly upset by Paula's promotion, but at first, he expressed his distress in terms of the children, who would be "deprived of Paula's time," rather than in terms of his own jealousy and resentment, which were visible despite his attempts to cover them up.

I asked how Paula's new job would affect the children. Paula was aware that she would not be able to give them the "special times" that I had recommended, and she admitted that this was a major concern. However, her solution was that Neil and his parents could "fill in" for her. Neil became furious, and a shouting match ensued, Neil claiming that this was the main problem: Vicki needed *more* of Paula, not *less*.

It was difficult during that visit to keep the Thorntons focused on Vicki. When I finally got them to talk about Vicki's reactions to Paula's new schedule, Paula told me about Vicki's rash. The urine had caused a slight rash in Vicki's genital area and on her thighs because she had stayed in damp pajamas. The doctor had given Paula some ointment, which had apparently helped. The Thorntons seemed pleased by Vicki's progress: she had had one solid week of dry nights, and the rash was disappearing. Neil, however, expressed concern that Vicki would "wet again" because of "Paula's selfishness."

Paula was enraged by Neil's comments and got up to leave, but I urged her to stay so that we could talk about how to help Vicki. Paula was adamant about keeping her job and suggested to Neil that he find "something else in New York" so that the family could have a "normal life."

Neil exploded again. His usual quiet demeanor—his "mask"—was shattered:

"Damn it, we've discussed my job situation hundreds of times. Remember, it was you who wanted to commute. You said it was going to be easy for you. We never planned on you marrying your job. You're a selfish bitch."

It was now impossible to continue this session and focus on the children. Both Thorntons were out

of control, and it was obvious that their major concern that evening was their own situation, not its effect on the children. This effect would have to be addressed, but not that evening.

As I witnessed their venom, I felt helpless. When I tried to intervene and calm them, they ignored me completely and continued to accuse each other of being selfish, uncaring, neglectful of the children, and personally ambitious. It was painful to listen to two decent people unleash so much fury, especially when I knew that Vicki and Katherine would suffer from the further strain between their parents. I ended the session by urging them to seek counseling immediately.

Later that evening, Paula called and asked if she could see me alone. Neil was going to a conference the following week, and she wanted to discuss Vicki in a “calm environment.” I agreed, and we made an appointment.

In the interim, Vicki’s sessions were a reflection of the tension in the Thornton household. Interestingly enough, the “device” was working. Despite the tensions, Vicki was remaining dry. She told me, “There must be a lot of people who wet at night ‘cause the store wouldn’t have these batteries just for one person.” This idea was comforting in some way just knowing that many other children shared her problem and needed an apparatus like hers was helpful to Vicki. Although the enuresis was now coming under control, Vicki’s relationships with her mother and with Katherine were still major sources of distress.

Vicki now played two games in addition to “camping.” Camping was still a favorite, but the “wild bear” was now more in evidence. The two children “shuddered” when the bear came. The “ranger protected” them and told the bear to “be good and go away forever,” but the bear always came back to “scare the children.” However, the children no longer “died”; they managed to keep “safe” inside the tent.

Vicki was less tolerant when she played “house.” Here the mother (who I was now convinced was also the “wild bear”) was constantly a “mean mommy” who “knocks the kids off their chairs.”

- Why is Mommy so mean?
- Well, she tells the kids they can’t have cake. The father doesn’t try to eat the cake—only the kids.

The mother goes to work, only she doesn't really go. She peeks through the window to see if the children will take the cake. When they do, here she comes: "Bad, bad girls! Don't you dare eat this cake!" She knocks them down.

- Those children must feel awful when the mother knocks them down.
- Yes, they do. Awful, awful. What a mother!
- Why won't she let them have the cake?
- They'll get fat. But they need that cake.
- Why do they need it?
- I don't know. They just need it.

Vicki stopped the game. She wouldn't tell me what she needed. It was not the cake, I knew; it was more of her mother's love. She played the game more frequently than before. Now that her special time on Saturdays with Paula had been eliminated, Vicki was distraught. This game alternated with a game she called "queen."

The queen dressed up in the play clothes: a red cape, a silver crown, a long boa, a necklace, and a blue skirt. She was very "cruel." She kept a "sister" locked up in the castle. This sister "can't get free." "One day, the brother came. He came to rescue the sister. He came from a far away planet. No matter what he does, he can't get the sister free. Then he has an idea. He tries a song. Then he tries a magic emerald. Nothing frees her. The queen is very busy. Nothing frees the sister. The end."

Vicki played this game during our next sessions with minor variations. The brother offered the queen different objects, but the queen refused to let the sister go. Although I had some hypotheses about its symbolism, this game confused me. Perhaps the queen was Vicki, in control of Katherine. Was the brother an aspect of Vicki, the part of Vicki that wanted to "save" Katherine and be kind to her? If so, that part of Vicki had still not been successful; Vicki had not yet found a way to be truly kind to her sister and could not yet completely eliminate her cruel thoughts and gestures toward Katherine. But I was optimistic. During our role-playing games, Vicki was more gentle with Katherine and less punitive. One day she suggested to me that we make a list titled "Can Do-Can't Do."

Here are the "Can Do" items:

Put play makeup on

Watch "Duck Tales"

Watch "Flintstones"

Take Katherine's stuff if she says yes

Watch TV during dinner

Read and sing

Here are the "Can't Do" items:

Hurt Katherine

Pee in bed

Be bad

Hit Katherine

Get wet in the rain

Swim without a grown-up watching

These items were Vicki's own ideas. While writing them down, she asked for help with the spelling, and she said she would tack this list up on her door. When I told her I liked her list and was proud of her idea of making it up, Vicki beamed.

This was the first time that Vicki had spontaneously tried to deal with her problems rather than have me suggest solutions or try to elicit them from her, and it seemed tragic to me that, just as Vicki making progress in expressing her feelings and controlling her bladder at night, she would now have to deal with the Thorntons' marital discord.

Paula's Visit

"I want to apologize for both of us and the way we acted last week. The tension in our house has been awful. In a way, I'm glad Neil is away for a few days. It gives me a chance to think.

"I've been walking around with stomach pains since my promotion, and I know they're not caused by the job and its demands. It's my guilt, my terrible guilt about the girls. But you have to understand. I can be a 'mother' only if I work. When I'm home, I'm truly miserable; I think about what I'm missing out there. As a mother, I'm lousy; in my job I'm great: expert, creative, directed, sure of myself, all the things that make me feel good about myself. At home, I see my failures, my inability to control the children, and my lack of real mothering skills, because I never had a real mother myself, I suppose. Like I told you, mine was a slob, someone who couldn't have cared less about our house. All I ever thought about when I was growing up was how successful and independent I would be. I would like to give Vicki and Katherine love, but I can't stay home."

"Paula, I'm glad you can share your feelings with me, but we have to think of some ways in which you can be available to Vicki and to Katherine. They both need your love. Could you possibly work at home one afternoon? Can you begin to think about this?"

Paula told me that she would give this suggestion some thought. She also told me that she and Neil were starting marriage counseling the following week. She wanted the marriage to work and was "convinced that Neil does, too." I was pleased to hear that the Thorntons were beginning therapy, but I knew that it meant one more late evening a week for both. The sessions were timed so that Paula would come home a little earlier, eat a quick dinner, and have just about enough time to read a brief story to each child. As a special treat, Paula's in-laws had agreed to come over on therapy nights and put the children to bed, helping Sylvie. The arrangement sounded fine; I just hoped it would materialize as planned.

During the remainder of this session, I was able to discuss Vicki's progress. There were still problems with Katherine and Vicki's jealousy of her, but I wanted Paula to know that Vicki was trying to work them out through role playing and through her own games. However, she needed Paula's recognition of her attempts to do so as well. It was also important for Paula to give some suggestion about

handling Katherine's incessant teasing of Vicki to Sylvie, who was reluctant to intervene, even when intervention was necessary. Paula listened and seemed appreciative and eager to do "what's right."

Obviously, the next few months would be critical in the marriage and in its effect on Vicki. Because summer was approaching and I would be ending my sessions with Vicki for the month of August, Paula and I discussed various options for her during the summer months, such as traditional day camp or attendance at a day music camp in which she had expressed interest. Paula agreed to explore these options and talk about them with Vicki. The Thorntons also planned a two-week family vacation in August, which I felt would be a wonderful opportunity for some quality time together.

When Paula left, I felt somewhat better than I had after the last session with both parents. It was evident that Paula's career was extremely important to her, but I also recognized that she truly did want her marriage to work, and that she was deeply concerned about her children's happiness. She wanted to be the Supermom, successfully handling career, marriage, and children. Given a choice, I thought, unfortunately, her career would come *before* her marriage and her children. This was the reality that I had to deal with in my work with Vicki.

The Hummingbird

It was time to prepare Vicki for the summer hiatus in our play therapy. Fortunately, Vicki would have some positive things to think about. She had opted for the music program because "I hate sports, and at regular camp, I'll have to do sports." At the camp, she planned to take piano lessons and also to join the chorus. She had a beautiful voice, and the discipline of working with a group would be excellent for her. Vicki's maternal grandmother bought her an upright piano, and Vicki was ecstatic.

Vicki had been dry for over two months, which was important because the music program had scheduled two "overnights" during the month. Vicki brought her star chart to show me her progress.

- Look, I'm dry all the time now.
- Yes, I see that. I'm proud of you.
- Katherine can't call me "pee-pee."

- No, I guess she can't. Does she still tease you?
- Sometimes she does, but I don't care. I just talk to her—no hits, no hits.
- Great. You're getting to be real grown-up.
- Yes, I am!

Vicki went to the dress-up rack and put on all the frilly clothes, glitter bows, two boas, and a pink ruffled cape. She flitted around the room like a hummingbird, darting back and forth, dancing and singing.

- You seem pretty happy today. I guess it feels good to keep dry for such a long time.
- Well, that's part of it. Music camp is part of it, too. But guess what's the best part?
- I can't guess. You tell me.
- We're going to Disney World in August. What do you think of that?
- I think that's just grand. You'll have a lot of fun.
- I have one worry.
- What is your worry?
- I don't want to take the device. But what if I can't stay dry?
- If you are dry now and can get up before the alarm, let's try taking off the device to see if you can still wake yourself up before you wet.
- I'd like to try, but I'm scared.
- I know you feel scared. If it doesn't work, we can use the device again. You can also take it along to Florida, just in case you need it.
- You know what? It's hard to be grown-up. It's easier to be little. When you're little, no one cares if you wet the bed. It's allowed!
- Do you want to be little?

A long pause.

- No, I guess not, but Dorothy, it is hard to be big!
- I know, but you're doing a good job of being grown-up.

Vicki began to dance again. This chubby little redhead who though she was clumsy danced around the room with grace, and from the smile on her face, I knew she liked herself a little bit.

Music Camp

July was a busy time for Vicki. Because music camp involved a five-day nine-to-four schedule, I saw Vicki early Saturday mornings during that month. The Thorntons were trying to work out their problems in counseling, and I saw them only once during July, in a session that was very subdued compared to their previous "fireworks" session. Both also felt more positive about Vicki's progress.

Neil spoke first: "Vicki is like a new person. She smiles more often, practices her piano each evening, and best of all, seems to be getting along better with Katherine."

Paula added, "She's dry most of the time; we've stopped using the alarm, and she's only wet once since we stopped."

"That's all right," I said. "She's been using it for only a short time. Occasional setbacks are not unusual. Do you still keep the star chart?"

"Yes, we do. Victoria is nervous about our Florida trip. She has mentioned this to you?" asked Paula.

"Yes, I think she doesn't want to be the 'baby' on the trip. We have discussed it. Just be patient. Take the alarm along, and don't make a big thing about it. I'm curious: How is the Vicki-Katherine relationship?"

Paula said that it had its "ups and downs." Katherine was alone more with Sylvie and enjoyed the attention. She was jealous of Vicki's piano, but the Thorntons had agreed that Katherine must wait to take lessons because Vicki needed to have accomplishments that were her very own. The major issue was

time. Because Vicki was at camp, Paula had not arranged for the day at home during the week to be with Vicki that we had discussed earlier, but she had been trying to spend more time with Vicki on the weekends.

“When school starts in the fall, and when Victoria is back on her routine, I’ll try to get home earlier one day to be with the girls. Right now things are going smoothly—with camp, the piano practice, and her therapy on Saturday.”

I told the Thorntons about Vicki’s dress-up times and her dancing like a hummingbird. It was important for her parents to know that she was beginning to express some joy. I wanted them to keep this joy alive and not destroy it with their marital problems. Realistically, however I knew that the Thorntons’ relationship was beyond my control, and that all I could do was support their efforts to remain in marriage counseling. We shook hands and said our good-byes, and I wished them a pleasant vacation. I had one more session with Vicki before our August break and knew that it would be a crucial one.

Vicki’s Party

Vicki came bouncing into the playroom and went to the dress-up rack. She put on her many-colored capes and skirts and asked if we could play the ballet music. She enjoyed dancing to the *Nutcracker* melodies and recognized each dance, preferring the “Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy” above all. Our July sessions were reflections of music camp: Vicki danced and sang. She then began a game called “the ballerina and the squirrel.”

Vicki was the ballerina and served tea to me, the squirrel. The squirrel ate “squirrel nuts” and also a “whole cake.”

- It’s OK, Squirrel. Eat the whole cake.
- It’s too much. Can we share it?
- No, it’s OK. Eat the whole thing.

I was told to eat it with “loud smacking noises.”

- This is a birthday party for the ballerina. The squirrel is the only one who comes. Everyone else is in Arizona or Florida. Here's milk and sugar for the tea. After we eat, we'll play with the dolls.
- Isn't there anyone else besides Squirrel who can come to your party?
- No, there is no one but Squirrel.

I remembered Neil's description of Vicki's party. Many children had come, but Vicki had felt that none of them truly cared about her. Was Vicki telling me that she knew I cared for her? Was that why she gave me the whole cake to eat? She knew we were parting for a month. Did she want to be sure that I would be her steadfast friend and would be there for her in the fall? I mentioned that we would not see each other for four weeks. Although I had been preparing Vicki since early in July, this was now her last summer session: reality.

- I'll come back in September, won't I, Dorothy?
- Yes, you will, and you'll be able to tell me all about Disney World.
- I could send you a letter from Florida.
- What a good idea! You can certainly do that.
- When I come back, you know what?
- What?
- I'll be in second grade!
- Of course. You'll be so big.
- I feel good about me. Am I fat?
- No, Vicki, you're not fat. I'm glad you feel good about yourself. Lots of things have happened to make you feel good.
- I'm dry at night, I can play a little bit on the piano, and I have two friends at camp.
- That's a lot of good stuff.

- I have bad stuff, too.
- Can you tell me?
- I have Katherine, I don't see Mommy much, and I hear Mommy and Daddy fight.
- Parents fight sometimes.
- I feel scared when they fight. They could divorce like Gabriela's parents.
- Who is Gabriela?
- My friend at camp. She lives with her mother. Her daddy lives in New Jersey. I don't want my daddy to live far away.
- Vicki, your family is together. You're going with them on a lovely vacation. I won't see you, but you'll be with your mother and your father and Katherine. Just think about the fun you'll have. And you know what? I'll write down my phone number. You can call me anytime in August if you want to say hello.

I was feeling a little bit sad about this session. It was such a mixture of good things—the first time Vicki had openly admitted that she felt “good”—and her anxiety about her parents. She had sensed the difficulties between them, and their fighting was the validation. I said good-bye to Vicki. She knew I was her friend and that she could call me if she wanted to.

The Thorntons' vacation was scheduled for mid-August. I thought it was important to phone them and alert them to Vicki's concerns and ask that they try not to fight in the presence of the children. The Thorntons received these messages with appreciation, and all I could do now was hope for the best.

September Comes

During August, I received a postcard from Vicki. She sent a Mickey Mouse card, neatly addressed to me. Carefully, she had printed the message: “I'm having fun. I went on lots of rides. I also swam a lot. Love, Vicki.”

We were starting our sessions again, and I was eager to see Vicki. I had received a note from Paula just before the family had left on vacation, wishing me a “wonderful vacation,” but also telling me there

had been some “slippage” at night due, Paula thought, to the “excitement” about the Disney World trip. She also mentioned that part of the “device was lost,” but she would try to replace it before they left for Florida. I heard no more and assumed that they had found the replacement.

Vicki resumed her therapy by mid-September. She told me that she had “had a great summer.” She was bubbly about Florida and delighted with her new teacher.

- In school, my teacher said if kids call me silly to ignore them, or to tell them I’m not silly. I could do that—I could really do that, in front of them. I could do that.
- That’s good. I think that’s better than yelling at them, or crying. I’m proud of you.
- And you know what? I only wet twice the whole vacation. What do you think of that?
- I think that’s just wonderful.
- But I have to tell you something bad. I called Mommy a dummy. I really didn’t mean it. It’s like it came out, like a big raindrop came to me and said “dummy.”
- Did you apologize?
- I did, but she didn’t listen the way you do.
- Maybe you can tell me why you called her dummy.
- Well, she was brushing my hair, and it hurt, so this raindrop made me say “dummy.”
- Sounds as if you were angry. You can tell her when it hurts. Can you do that?
- I could.
- We can role-play that if you like.

We role-played the hair-combing game. Then Vicki told me other things that angered her, such as Paula’s emphasis on diet, her working so hard, and her commuting to New York. Now Vicki was able to *talk* about her worries, rather than use her “camping,” “queen,” or “house” games. She seemed more mature and more willing to discuss her problems concerning Paula.

Our sessions began to change tone over the next two months. On occasion, Vicki would revert to her game of “house” and the “mommy” who “beat up” the children for eating cake, but when she played this game, it was different. Her new version seemed to be a parody of the earlier game, in which more angry feelings had been expressed. Now Vicki seemed to be laughing at the idea of the “mommy” depriving the children of cake. Vicki told me that she saw her mother as “perfect,” but that she, Vicki, didn’t want to be “Miss Perfect.”

Vicki’s relationship with Katherine was much improved. She teasingly told me it was “perfect” with Katherine. What had helped, of course, was Katherine’s enrollment in kindergarten. Now Katherine felt important, less like a baby, and did not feel compelled to intrude on Vicki’s space.

The one piece in the Thornton puzzle that was still missing was the relationship between Paula and Neil. I tried to schedule a meeting with them early in October, but they canceled it. We didn’t meet until the beginning of November, although Paula and I talked briefly on the phone several times. She seemed reluctant to discuss anything over the phone, so I was apprehensive about the November appointment. I wondered what was happening in the marriage, in Paula’s job, and, of course, concerning their attitude toward Vicki.

The Thorntons came late for their appointment. Paula had missed her train, so Neil picked her up at the station, and they came directly to the session. She had had no dinner, felt bad about not having seen the girls that evening, and seemed utterly exhausted.

Paula spoke first: “We’ve been seeing the counselor again since September. I’ve been giving my life some serious scrutiny, and I think we’ve decided on a new plan. We’re moving back to New York. Neil will commute now, and I’ll have more time with the girls. I know this means an uprooting again for the kids, but we will wait until June to do it. By then, Victoria will adjust to our plans, won’t she? It’s a trade-off: She’ll have more of me. Isn’t that what she wants? And we all keep our jobs. That’s what I want. Neil says he’ll commute.”

“How do you feel?” I asked Neil.

“It’s for the best. We can’t go on like this. It’s a strain. Look, I wanted to commute in the first place.

Paula was the martyr. I also have more regular hours. I can drive to Connecticut and be home by six or six-thirty. God, we should have stayed in New York. We should have done this in the first place.”

“Maybe you needed to try this arrangement in Connecticut to convince yourselves that New York was where you belonged,” I said.

“But Dorothy,” Paula interrupted, “Victoria had her problems in New York, too. She bed-wet there every night.”

“Yes, I know that. I know that some of her problems were not related to the move. I know that she felt unloved and had a poor self-image. She feels better now. She’s accomplished so much. I think she’ll handle the move back rather easily. We have time to discuss this in our play sessions, and we can all prepare her for the change.”

Neil added that this move would be at a good time for Katherine because she would start first grade in her new school. The Thorntons were applying to a private school for the girls, one of the best in New York, and I felt that the girls would do well and thrive there.

But now, I would have to work with Vicki. Changes were always difficult for her, and her attachment to her second-grade teacher in Connecticut was a strong one. I suggested that the whole family visit the new school in the spring if the girls were accepted. I also gave the Thorntons the name of an excellent psychologist for Vicki in New York, in case she had any setbacks.

Paula and Neil appeared to be relieved. I think they’d been afraid that I wouldn’t approve of their decision. They were planning to remain in marriage counseling through early spring. As their marriage seemed to be on firmer footing than before, I was optimistic about its continued improvement.

Vicki’s Last Months in Therapy

Vicki continued to make great strides in her therapy over November and December. The piano lessons had continued after camp ended, and her plate was full. Vicki’s therapy sessions were reduced to once a week so that she could take the music lessons. It was important for her to keep them up because of

her pride in her accomplishment.

Reducing the number of sessions with Vicki had no ill effects. She began to make friends, and she began writing out long lists of the children she would invite to her eighth birthday party. Her standing joke about her relationship with Katherine was “perfect, perfect, perfect,” always accompanied by a twinkle in her eye. We both knew what this meant. It was our “secret signal,” according to Vicki.

Vicki’s one major concern now was whether she could “stay dry” on a sleepover. All the girls in her class were going to pajama parties, replete with pizzas, sodas, and rock records. Vicki was invited to these parties but had been reluctant to go. Even though she had had only one accident since September, she was still fearful about her bed-wetting. A particular friend, Amy, had invited Vicki and Gabriela to sleep over. Vicki was worried about drinking soda all evening and how it would affect her.

- I’ll die if I wet the bed. I’ll die.
- You can drink only little sips and be sure to go to the bathroom before you go to sleep.
- I know, but what if my body doesn’t listen when I have to go?
- Your body will listen. It’s been listening for a long time.
- I’m worried, too, about my birthday party.
- What are your worries?
- What if no one comes?
- Everyone worries about that. But you know what? They do come.
- Sometimes, Dorothy, I don’t know how to feel. I’m happy, but I don’t know if I’m happy. I feel like a love box is coming to me, but I worry.
- You worry about staying happy?
- Yes, yes. What if I don’t stay happy?
- Vicki, everyone feels happy sometimes and sad sometimes.

- Is that OK?
- Yes, it's OK. Can you tell me what some of the sad things are?
- Will I have good friends in my new school? It's so hard to make friends. I have some now. What if no one likes me in that school?
- Vicki, I think they'll like you. You're very different from the girl you were before. You like *yourself*, and that's important.
- I do like myself. My love box is private.
- You don't want anyone to know you care for yourself?
- Dorothy, I'll tell everyone when I want to!
- That's all right. You can do just that.

The Love Box

Vicki was enthusiastic about her visit to the private school in New York, and “best of all,” the apartment that the Thorntons had purchased was within walking distance of the school. Vicki felt sad about leaving her friends but planned to have sleepovers for them. Her sleepover at Amy's had been a success and had given Vicki the confidence she needed. Her schoolwork was going well. She did need some extra help in arithmetic, but even that was coming along. We agreed that we would say good-bye right after her birthday party. I had been gradually phasing out Vicki's therapy, seeing her in alternate weeks.

As her birthday approached, Vicki did have one setback. She wet a week before her party. Her tears during our session were nonstop, but she managed to get control and explained that she had had a “bad” day in school, that she had fought with Katherine, and that Mommy hadn't keep her “reading date” with Vicki that night—but had “read to Katherine.”

- So you felt a little bit unloved and jealous again.
- Yes.

- When you feel bad and sad, you become like a little baby, I think, and wet.
- Yes. I think that's why I wet. I was angry at Mommy and Katherine, and I just didn't care.
- You can control your wetting when you want to.
- Yes, I really can. You know what? I can do something else when I'm angry.
- I hope you can. Tell me.
- I can talk about it the way we do here.
- That's important, Vicki. Can you truly remember that? Can you talk about your feelings with your mom and dad the way you can in this room?
- I can. I think I can.
- If I know you can, we can say good-bye to each other.
- Do I have to?
- You're able to help yourself now. Let's try it out for a while. If you need me, I'm here. We've been talking about our last time together for a few weeks now, and after your party, we'll have it
- Dorothy, can I draw a picture for you?
- I'd like that.

Vicki came to the table, chose a red crayon, and drew a girl. On her chest, she drew a box and, inside it, drew a heart, saying, "I have a love box now." She printed the word *love* on the heart. She also drew a "love box" around the girl. Perhaps Vicki felt that she was now enfolded in an atmosphere of love and was also able to love. On the top of the page Vicki printed, "For Dorothy. MY LOVE BOX IS HERE."

Vicki's party was a huge success. She saved me a piece of cake and brought it to our last session.

"Here" she said, "remember when you were the squirrel? This time I shared the cake with lots of kids. I have lots of friends now."

Indeed, Vicki did have friends now. I was no longer the only one who would receive her friendship, and that was good.

The Thorntons came for their last session with me, too. Paula looked more like her old self—less harried and more composed than she had seemed over the summer and early fall months, when the stress was at its high point. Neil actually seemed excited about the move back to New York. They thanked me for my help and said they would keep in touch.

They did. I heard from the Thorntons a year after they had moved. A brief note from Paula said all was well. She enclosed a picture of Vicki, who was beaming. Paula still called her daughter Victoria—and I think she always will. On the back of the photo, Vicki had printed, “My love box is still here.”