Elusive Childhood

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Thanks to my mother, Mary Honeyman, whose respect for children, I hope, resonates here. Thanks to my nieces, Ashley, Jamie, and Becca Honeyman, who serve as refreshing reminders that children aren’t just inscrutable, they are fascinating people.
Finally, I would like to dedicate this book to the family (and memory) of Anne Turner, who died from cancer less than a month after I defended my dissertation. Her brother, Jay, told this story at her memorial:

It all started when my parents discovered teeth marks on the top corner of their dresser. I couldn’t really explain to you now why I happened to chew on that corner. It just seemed like the thing to do at the time and it seemed to satisfy my appetite for destruction. I was the first of the usual suspects my parents rounded up and was subjected to their standard interrogation procedure. During the questioning, I calmly stated that I was unaware of how the marks got there but that I would certainly look into the matter.

Left with only one other possible suspect, my parents confronted Anne, believing that they had apprehended the guilty party. After all, the corner of the dresser came up to the level of Anne’s mouth, not mine, never once considering that I had stood tiptoe at that corner. During the interrogation my parents informed Anne that they knew that one of us had committed this infraction. In one of her earliest feats of dizzying logic and self-assurance, Anne replied, “How do we know that one of you didn’t do it?”

This question should resonate throughout my book, culminating in the final chapter. The retort, “How do I know?” is not childish preamble to elusive legalese—it protests that truth is not the issue in such conversations, authority is. And kids seem to understand that the power imbalance (where knowledge and age have the potential to override intuition, and sometimes even the truth) can relegate whatever they do know to inconsequentiality when measured against adult interests. According to this anecdote, Anne and Jay Turner weren’t innocent—they hid the truth—but Anne’s question cuts to the point that innocence or guilt doesn’t necessarily matter. What matters is that parents have the power to decide, if they choose, because they “say so.” And kids might resist by questioning their say.