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Why Do We Blame Mothers? Maternal Responsibility in Father-Daughter Incest Narratives, Research, History, and Gender Bias

This article interrogates notions of mothers' complicity in the sexual abuse of their children by their fathers. It seeks to understand their secondary trauma in relation to such abuse within the patriarchal confines of the family. As a psychologist and childhood survivor of sexual abuse, I interrogate societal tendencies to blame mothers for the behaviour of men who subject their children to such abuse. This prejudicial response has not softened despite increased understanding of the difficulties many women face—both practical and psychological—in wanting to leave an abusive situation, even when it impacts their children. My experience as a survivor of a family in which sexual abuse and violence perpetrated by my father impacted me, my mother, and my siblings informs my interest. In addition, as a psychologist, I am well equipped to interrogate the rippling affect/effect of misogynistic events in which daughters and mothers are put at odds and individually vilified. My research aims to gain a better understanding of the trauma suffered by maligned and vulnerable partners, women, and wives trapped in father-daughter abuse crises and their representation in certain narratives, my own and that of others. Implicit in this enquiry are the agency and wellbeing of survivor children.

This article explores the representation of mothers as accountable agents within families where father-daughter incest has occurred to demonstrate the extent to which mothers are blamed for situations of it, when occurring most often outside of their control. I write primarily from personal experience and as a practising psychologist. To this extent, my work is autoethnographic, using an informed, immersed first-person narrator to explore stereotypes and attitudes with universal significance. I do so to underscore the extent to which

the blaming of mothers in father-daughter incest occurs at subterranean levels, which abstract theory fails to encapsulate.

As much as any parent is responsible for the care of their children, in the past, mothers were often unfairly blamed for the incest, for failing in their responsibility towards their abused children, either through denial or through collusion with the perpetrators, as research from the 1990s and early 2000s into the role of mothers in father-daughter incest demonstrates. This at a time when prejudice arising from patriarchal pressures and misogyny was not so well recognized as today. But even today, as Michael Salter, Director of the Australian arm of Childlight, which undertakes extensive research on the impact of child abuse and exploitation, demonstrates, nonoffending women in situations of familial incest are still subject to harsh judgments, stigmatization, and isolation. This is more so, given the unspeakable nature of such offences. "How could he do it?" soon becomes "How could she let him do it?" The secret and unspeakable nature of incest leaves mothers unduly responsible, thereby distancing the perpetrator from full responsibility.

Incest happens in secrecy. It is private and flourishes under the cover of darkness. Once exposed, it can morph into blaming mothers for its existence. How much does this tendency to blame mothers for incest reflect the significance of mothers as the first port of call in our lives? When things go wrong, as they must inevitably do, mothers tend to be our first line of defence against pain. Mothers must help us, we believe, or they are held to blame for the fact that we are suffering. And mothers invariably fail us, as they must.

I grew up in an incestuous household during the 1950s and 1960s and recognize the powerful pressure of gender bias. Sigmund Freud's theories, although questioned, still held sway—at least in the psychological world of my initial social work training, overloaded with gender discrimination, until the advent of second-wave feminism in the 1970s and beyond. Despite advances in this area, as Christina Risley-Curtis and Kristin Heffernan explain, mother blaming today "is as viable as ever, both in clinical journals and practice" (395).

The issue is also generational. Before no-fault divorce, women could not readily leave their abusive husbands without social and economic retribution. So, in many cases, they were forced to turn a blind eye to the abuse (Salter, personal communication, 12 Aug. 2025). Add to this the range of studies that demonstrate a "crossover between men who sexually abuse their children and men who perpetuate domestic violence" (Salter et al. 1, "Secrecy"). As Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan argue, although the term "families" is used in discussions in research on the incidence of child maltreatment, the focus is "really on the mothers, regardless of whether they were the perpetrators" (396).

When I was a child, my father regularly visited my sister at night, in the bed opposite mine. I knew this was happening, but as an eight-year-old, I could

not make sense of it; I only wished it had not happened. I knew enough not to talk about it with anyone.

In the vast halls of my memory, it was some months, maybe years, before my mother caught my father in bed with my sister. She demanded he leave, or she would kill him. Fierce words from a woman who, for her entire marriage, tried to pacify the man as best she could. In this instance, she spoke firmly, but her words alone were not enough, and decades later, my sister told me, when our mother came to her some weeks after the confrontation to ask if our father was still visiting at night, my sister said he had stopped. He had not. My sister lied, she told me later, because she thought our mother was happier this way.

How do we unpack such stories? The adult me asks the questions: Why was my mother not more attentive? Why did she not stay awake and notice when her husband left their bed and stop him? At the same time, the adult me understands why my mother did not leave my father, even after she knew of the abuse. She had nine children in her care. He was the breadwinner. Her meagre income from working in childcare was never enough to support us all. Besides, she was raised Catholic, and to her, marriage was for life.

These days, both parents are dead, and much water has sluiced through, but my five brothers still blame our mother. Her daughters tend towards greater forgiveness, but not entirely. I wonder what I might do if my husband sexually abused one of our daughters. How to live with such internal dissonance? We could understand better the difficulties of mothering children in a world that expects us as mothers to give up everything for our family by unpacking the societal pressures that deny the vulnerability of women trapped in such situations. My story offers a clear illustration of the extent to which mothers are often unfairly blamed for father-daughter incest, even when they, too, were helpless against it.

Mothers Are Primary Carers and Are Therefore Held Responsible

In Elizabeth Strout's novel, *Olive Kitteridge,* there comes a moment when Olive learns that her adult son is in therapy. In response, she turns to her husband, "You're not to worry about that, Henry. In therapy they go straight after the mother. You come out smelling like a rose, I'm sure" (278).

Even as Strout writes tongue-in-cheek, Olive Kitteridge is right. We go for mothers. In my work as a psychotherapist, I often explore the nature of the relationship between the people with whom I work and their parents, especially their mothers. I suspect this goes back to my original training in object relations theory, a school of thought within psychoanalysis that emphasizes the ways early relationships with caregivers shape our subsequent behaviour and experience.

Those who study early infant attachments explore the multiple dimensions

of a child's connection to their parents through their internal representations. Attachment theory argues that our early experiences with caregivers influence not only how we feel and behave in childhood but also how they affect our relationships, behaviour, and experience into adulthood. Mothers typically provide initial primary care. And we tend to hold them responsible for what happens to their children, even when the environment and their fathers, including significantly abusive parental partners, bear down on them.

It began with Freud after he reversed his theory and recognized the extent of childhood sexual abuse. Several young women in his care had reported instances of incest, but he shifted his focus to argue that the "hysteria" of the child who is sexually abused by a parent or close relative has more to do with repressed sexual desires towards the parent of the opposite sex than with any experience (205). In other words, each child struggles with their own incestuous desire and grapples with the tension of their burgeoning sexuality instead of being traumatized by the experience of sexual abuse at the hands of caretakers. As Joanne Erhmin observes, psychiatric nursing textbooks first referred to parental sexual abuse of a child as "incestual longing" in 1977, and in that same year, it was first listed as a sexual crime in such textbooks, with "maternal deprivation … also [being] identified" (255).

Sandor Ferenczi sought to revise Freud's notions in a 1932 paper. He describes how the introduction of sexuality too soon into a child's life can destroy their capacity to make meaning of their experience. He was discredited at the time. Children seek tenderness, Ferenczi argues, not adult passion, but perpetrators can confuse their own desires for those of the children. As such, the abusive father might claim he is doing it for her good, while exploiting his child's body for his own sexual gratification. And his wish for dominance.

As much as there is value in exploring the nature of attachment in infancy, the tendency thereby is to focus on the maternal connection to the infant, with scant regard to the role of fathers. How much must this colour and feed the prevailing view that mothers are the first port of call for children? If something goes wrong, it becomes the mother's fault, even when a father is sexually abusing said child. Even when he is the perpetrator.

As studies into gender bias in welfare indicate, women "are usually held responsible for the nurturing of all family relationships, not just the mother-child relationship" (Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan 399). And as Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan argue, when it comes to managing the father-child relationship, "the entire focus … was on actions 'taken' or 'not taken' by the women in the study" (399). It is as if the mother is an accomplice to the crime or, worse, she is seen to be responsible for it. However, as Salter and colleagues argue, "Men who engage in CSAM [child sexual abuse material] and child sexual offending in family settings are under-studied" (16).

How much does this dynamic emerge from patriarchal discourse? How

much does it twist the narrative? As Neige Sinno, whose memoir *Sad Tiger* reflects on seven years of childhood sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather, writes, "Powerful men, dictators, or even simply people who want more power … will use any argument they can find. They don't need to invent contexts to suit them, every crisis is good, every absence of crisis is good, everything can be turned in their favor" (45). Sinno's stepfather—like other child sexual abuse perpetrators, including my own father—took it upon himself to speak in the language of self-justification. He was doing it for his stepdaughter's sake, he told her. To prepare her for a life with men. He came from a repressed religious family where no one ever talked of such matters, so as a young man, he had endured the embarrassment of a first girlfriend mocking him for his sexual ineptitude. He told his stepdaughter he did not want her to share this experience. So, he educated her in all things sexual throughout her early years (Sinno 43).

My father took a similar line with my elder sister, blaming his behaviour on our mother's repressed Catholic upbringing: her prudery in their marital bed and our mother's ineptitude in sexually pleasuring him, as he believed she ought. This meant he needed to educate my sister in all things sexual before she came of age to prepare her for marriage, for example, stretch her vagina to make it ready for her husband-to-be. Essentially, he blamed our mother for abusing their daughter. However, as Salter argues, "The old explanation for incest on the basis of maternal frigidity is just straightforward medical misogyny" (Salter, personal communication, 12 Aug. 2025).

In the prevailing ethos of the early twentieth century, mothers are the ones who are supposed to provide sexual relief, and if they fail, and their husbands turn towards their daughters, it must be because of the mother. The shadow of such notions hangs over us more than a century later. For example, "mankeeping," a term coined by sociologists Angelica Ferrar and Dylan Vergara, refers to the extent to which, as Kate Manne describes, a woman

> "is expected to provide for all [their male partner's] social needs—simultaneously playmate and drinking buddy and intimate partner—or arrange that his social needs otherwise get met by managing his calendar and reminding him to call his friends and family members." (Manne). All of this is outside the issue of sexual abuse of children, but it speaks to what Manne refers to as "male entitlement," a primary feature in the sexual abuse of children. Some fathers believe it is their right to use their children as they choose, which is the ultimate sense of entitlement.

Towards the end of the last century, when scholars began to explore the role of mothers in father-daughter incest, the emphasis was on how such mothers had failed their daughters, primarily through passivity. The mother did not

know or did not want to know, even when the abuse happened in secrecy under the cover of darkness, and no one told her about it, not her husband or her child. She should have known and stopped it.

Why do we blame mothers for our unbearable experiences, going back to our infancy and beyond? Is it built around the fact that most of us spent approximately nine to ten months housed inside the body of this person? We were once treated as one, until birth. This woman nurtured and cared for us in utero and then went with us through the rigours of labour as we entered the world, and, hopefully, at the end of that first huge trial, she was there to attach to as best we could, as best she could, to form an inextricable bond that stays in our psyches for the rest of our lives.

When she was dying, in her ninety-fourth year, my mother called out to her own mother, "Mama, where are you? I need you." She had told me earlier that her relationship with her mother was distant, until in her final days, when she called out for maternal comfort. This is suggestive of the extent to which we carry our mothers with us in our bones and sinews, in our memories and psyches. They are the hallmark of our deepest dependency needs, our needs for closeness, our hunger, and our thirst.

Mothers were there at the get-go, if only for a short time, and thereafter a form of them holds fast in our memories and imaginations, both to sustain us in hard times or become a source of resentment at their neglect. The renowned psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott, who dedicated his life to understanding what he called the "ordinary mother," felt oppressed by his own mother, Elizabeth Martha. He spoke of his childhood experience as trying to make a living "keeping his mother alive" (qtd. in Minsky 134) and to help her with her underlying depression. She was prone to dark moods, while his father was seen to be inspirational. How much did this experience inform his research focus?

Winnicott's work explores the mother-child bond, and like other mother-oriented therapists, he designed "studies in which families are rarely observed or seen at night when fathers might be present" (Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan 260). The father is often eliminated from such studies. In his paper "Hate in the Counter-Transference," a classic in psychoanalytic studies and focussing on therapists' sometimes hostile feelings towards their patients, Winnicott lists ten reasons why mothers hate their babies. In this paper, he explores the extent to which mothers teach their babies to hate; the implication again is that it is the mother's fault whenever ambivalence or animosity enters the picture. Our infantile wish might well be for an unconditionally loving mother, with no needs of her own to conflict with our needs and desires, a need for what he calls the "good enough" mother (Winnicott, *The Child* 173).

But mothers are never good enough, it seems, when it comes to situations of childhood sexual abuse. Months before her death, my mother wrote a letter that she asked my elder sister to copy and circulate to every one of her children.

My sister and I responded to this letter. My younger sisters might likely have done so, too, but as far as I know, not one of my brothers responded to our mother's heartfelt plea to forgive her for the mistakes she had made.

I once blamed her, too, for not protecting us better—for not leaving the man she had married as a twenty-two-year-old woman in Haarlem, Holland, during the Second World War. A man, she later told me, she had married for his intellect and good looks, especially in uniform. A man of whom her parents disapproved because he was not Catholic and came from a less respectable family than theirs. But my father agreed to convert, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Why did my siblings, especially my brothers, refuse to respond to my mother's request for forgiveness? Why did they leave her stewing in her guilt for something the man she married did in his drunken rages, especially to my elder sister?

After I finished reading my mother's autobiography, which she wrote when she was in her early seventies, the age I am now, I, too, condemned her tendency to slide over what she once described as "the grotty bits." Like her sister-in-law, my father's sister, presumably also sexually abused by her father, my grandfather, my mother did not want the story to be aired. She seemed content to take the rap for her husband's behaviour.

In her feminist perspective on a tendency to blame mothers in nursing, Erhmin cites research describing the mother in abusive households as "a weak, passive woman who may be physically or emotionally incapacitated" (254), even as there is ample recognition that "incest is a crime of dominance" (253). And so, throughout the literature, mothers are portrayed as holding pathological personality traits that directly or indirectly lead to and somehow justify sexual assault (McIntyre 462)—a theoretical blaming of the victim.

Given their role as primary carers, mothers are thereby held responsible in situations of father-daughter incest to maintain the prevailing view that they should have known and stopped it from happening in the first place or at least put a stop to it once it had happened. This implies that nonabusive mothers are as culpable as the perpetrators for not saving the child and family from the incest.

Patriarchal Prejudice Gives Rise to Unfair Assumptions and Misogynistic Tropes

Past literature is riddled with sexist and patriarchal assumptions that scapegoat mothers for the sins of their husbands. Social worker Kevin McIntyre explores the history of our perception of the role of mothers in father-daughter incest and the extent to which incest in families was said to emerge only in dysfunctional family settings (462). Again, incest happens to reduce tensions

within families where mothers are not fulfilling their role as wives and mothers, particularly in the realm of sexuality, when mothers, like my mother, were not giving their husbands all the sex they wanted. Or perhaps again—as in the case of my mother, who was on and off pregnant, twelve times over the course of more than twenty years, from the time she was twenty-two to her mid-forties—they were too preoccupied for constant sex. How sexually available could my mother have been to my father, who believed sexual gratification was his right?

McIntyre writes about how the literature describes two types of women in cases of incest: those who do not know and are considered passive, and "active" partners, called silent partners, who knew about the incest but did nothing about it. He quotes historian Joseph J. Peters on the "unconscious vicarious pleasure by the woman partner as she witnessed her husband's loss of sexual control" (qtd. in McIntyre 462). Other women, Peters argues, "received voyeuristic stimulation" (qtd. in McIntyre 462). Or as hinted at in my own family, there is the mother who puts "the child in bed between herself and her husband to buffer his sexual advances." (qtd. in McIntyre 462). It is as if the mother triggered the sexual assault. Either they found relief from the demands of their role as wife and mother by allowing their daughters to meet their husbands' unmet sexual demands, or, worse still, they took vicarious pleasure in seeing their daughters abused by their fathers—a perverse form of voyeurism and sadism. Such "active" mothers were vilified as dysfunctional in their inability to maintain a good and loving protective maternal role. McIntyre also refers to misogynistic notions within past research of mothers who fail in their maternal roles and thereby facilitate the abuse. "Fighting the boredom, disappointment, and lack of personal fulfillment that accompany the traditional maternal role, mothers who turn to new interests, whether through work or education, or other means, are depicted as selfish, irrational and irresponsible—fleeing from their emotional duties at home. (McIntyre, 463) " The implication: How dare women seek a life beyond motherhood? Those career driven women who care only for themselves and therefore neglect their children and spouses must in part be responsible for the abuse. The message, McIntyre argues, is that when incest occurs, no matter what mothers do, they will be seen to be contributing, whether directly or indirectly, thereby deflecting attention away from the perpetrator.

The statistics on such maternal behaviours also remain unclear, given the dearth of research and the unspoken nature of the incest taboo until more recently, when awareness reemerged under the impact of the #MeToo movement. But this movement against sexual violence more broadly has failed to delve deeply enough into the ubiquity of incest, even as it alerts us to our societal tolerance of misogyny and the oppression of women everywhere.

Seen through an historical lens with its patriarchal focus on the days when

women were primarily seen as their husbands' possession, as were their children, misogyny holds fast. Women were helpless to put a stop to sexually abusive behaviour to this day, as many women still fall victim to abusive husbands who coerce and control. As Judith Herman argues, we cannot understand incest without understanding "male supremacy and female oppression" (*Father* 191). How much are tropes, such as the "seductive daughter" and the "collusive mother" in father-daughter incest, convenient by-products of male hegemony? (Coulborn Faller 130).

In 1997, Jennifer Freyd coined the acronym DARVO, the way in which abusers deny, attack the person who confronts, and then reverse the victim-perpetrator position. She spoke to the struggle for women in situations where they are abused and then blamed for the abuse, as happened to my mother (22–32). Salter's research demonstrates the extent to which, in such situations, most mothers and partners are secondary victims. Five years earlier, Freyd took her father to court, claiming he had sexually abused her as a child. He fought the charges and won. Then, with his wife Pamela, her father established the False Memory Syndrome Foundation in the United Kingdom, an organization arguing that therapists can implant false ideas of abuse in the people with whom they work. Its sister organization in the United States was led by another couple, Lutheran minister Ralph Underwager and his wife, Hollida Wakefield. Underwager's daughter, likewise, accused her father of sexual abuse. He, too, was successful against her in court but was later found to be sympathetic to pedophiles. The Foundation was soon disbanded (Hinshelwood 149–65).

False memory arguments fuel the vast pedophile network that operates behind the scenes (Salter et al., "The Child"). It, too, seeks to vilify any woman who tries to protect herself or her children against the cruel consequences of misogynistic attitudes blaming women for everything that goes awry. Salter and his colleagues illustrate the consequences for mothers in their research into the effects on women when they realize their partner is a child sexual abuse offender, including fathers who sexually abuse their own children or through noncontact means in the collection of child sex abuse material in pedophilic pornography (Salter et al., "You Feel" 890). One interviewee from their research, after learning of their husband's use of child sexual material, tried to make sense of her husband's betrayal, which was underscored by the knowledge that he had also abused their daughter: "It was everything, everything—where do I live, what do I do, how do I deal with people, where do I put this? Is there shame, is there blame? There are lots of things that initially you don't even think of for yourself because you're so worried about your children and where you're going to live and what you're going to do" (Salter et al., "You Feel" 900).

The world is organized according to power, not justice, as Kate Hamilton

writes. And as a rule, men have more power. In her book *Mad Wife*, Hamilton addresses these issues and describes her experience of marriage to a man who in the early days of their life together, before children, had a dream romance, of love, of sex and companionship. But after their sons were born, her husband became possessive in an understated way and could not bear to go for long without the reassurance of sex with his wife. She relented most of the time, but over time, she made it clear to him that she did not enjoy the endless repetition of their sexual life.

In reading Hamilton, I am reminded of my mother on Saturday afternoons, as she took my father to bed purely for the sake of sparing us children his presence. And Hamilton, too, endured her husband's sexual demands even as she came to despise the experience. In time, Hamilton's husband urged his wife into a life of swinging with other couples to revive their sex life. Hamilton followed her husband through this, and in part, she claims she enjoyed the experience, but when she became too close to one of the other couples, he objected.

Mad Wife is the story of a woman's long struggle to leave her husband. He cannot bear to be with her any longer, but he cannot bear for her to leave. And once she does, he punishes her and their children mercilessly. But even in the courts, when she fights for custody of her younger son after his father begins abusing him, the court lawyers, psychologist, and judge rule in her husband's favour. This is evidence of misogyny writ large in their decision and distortion of her evidence. As a determined and educated woman, Hamilton is a threat. She needs to be put back in her place. On top of which, the police consider it the right of parents to punish their children, even to the point of cruelty, or so it seems to Hamilton when she seeks to save her son. She is held responsible for all the problems until she writes her book and declares her role in this story.

How her sons might judge her in years to come if they have the strength to read her book is anyone's guess. Again, is this why we tend to hold mothers responsible for our struggles? Their inability to hold us well enough? And in father-daughter incest, how much do we hold mothers responsible, even when they do not know their husband or partner is abusing their child in ways that contribute to what Leonard Shengold calls "soul murder" of that child? How does a mother live with the knowledge that her partner has sexually abused one or more of their children? This is a question that dogs the minds of those in this time of questioning the how and why of childhood sexual abuse. Our tendency to blame the mother. Think Alice Munro, the once-famed Canadian writer whose reputation is now tarnished after her death, when her third daughter, Andrea Skinner, revealed that her stepfather had crept into her room at night and sexually abused her as a child. Munro knew this by the time Andrea was twenty-five, and even earlier, hinted at this knowledge in her

stories, but still she stayed silent—seemingly the ultimate betrayal of a child (Smee). But it is complicated.

My mother also stayed with her husband long after it became clear he, too, was sexually abusing her eldest daughter for many years. In her book *No Matter Our Wreckage,* Gemma Carey explores this subject further when she realizes her mother knew she was sexually abused between twelve and sixteen by a friend several years her senior. He snuck into her house at night. Carey, as a twelve-year-old, imagined she was willing. Where is the consent here? The two, her abuser and she, exchanged letters, which her mother intercepted but failed to acknowledge. And Carey, who has since died an untimely death through complications of her chronic ill health and autoimmune disease, presumably induced through her childhood trauma, is testimony to the damage done. Why, when her mother knew, Carey asks, did she allow the abuse to continue? Why did she not put a stop to it? Carey also suspects her mother was abused as a child. The generational repeat.

My mother tried to stop it. The night she caught my father inside the bedroom I shared with my elder sister, he was hunched over my sister's body as she lay in bed—"like a little bird with frightened eyes," my mother told me years later. My mother wanted to believe his abuse had stopped. She had no idea of the power of alcohol and my father's own history of sexual abuse at the hands of his father, my paternal grandfather: a man I never met.

On her side, in her memoir, which my mother wrote twenty years before her death, she describes an incident in which word came from her father, my *Opa*, an exemplar in the Catholic Church in Haarlem, that the people from the St Vincent de Paul Society were in search of new baby clothes for a thirteen-year-old girl who was pregnant to her father. My mother, by then herself a young mother, offered the girl clothes from her collection. She marvelled at the tragedy of such an event, some forty years before her own husband was sexually abusing her daughter. Why this gap in her knowledge? Why this disconnect between the tragedy of a young woman who carried a baby born of incest and my sister, who did not fall pregnant to my father but still suffered under the weight of his sexual advances? Which I did, too, vicariously.

When I grew into young adulthood and first studied as a social worker, I was furious with my mother for her decision to stay with my father. He had abused her, too, both physically and mentally, but still she stayed. I had not yet read Jess Hill's book, *See What You Made Me Do*. I did not understand why it was so dangerous and difficult for a woman to leave her husband, no matter the levels of abuse directed towards her or her children.

Patriarchal pressures, which can leave women stuck in unequal and often coercively controlling relationships, feed the notion that when children are sexually abused by their fathers, mothers are to blame for not taking greater care of them and for not resisting misogynistic claims they are fully responsible

for the upkeep of their households; therefore, they should have known and put a stop to such abuse, even when their inferior and somewhat servile state makes it almost impossible to withstand such often hidden control.

The Secret Unspeakable Nature of Incest Leaves Mothers Responsible and Thereby Distances the Perpetrator from Full Responsibility

Why do we blame mothers for not taking care of their children better in incest families? It is as if somehow the active participant in the process, the perpetrator of said abuse, is less the culprit than the woman who stands by helplessly. My mother believed that her strong words to my father that night—the strongest words I have ever known her to offer, words of protest—would be enough to stop him in his tracks and protect her daughters.

Before she died, my mother wrote a separate letter to my elder sister, who was the direct victim of my father's sexual abuse. Though indirectly, there is enough evidence to suggest all my father's children, but especially his daughters, suffered under his advances—my brothers, for the confused role model he provided, and for my sisters and me, the fact that the possibility of our abuse as next in line haunted us throughout our childhoods.

My mother never left my father for good before his death at sixty-five. As a child, when I wanted her to stay away for good, I put it down to her Catholicism. My mother left my father several times temporarily during my childhood, at one time for a full year when my younger siblings and I decamped with her to a rental near the beach in Parkdale. An older brother had arranged this during my final year of schooling, one of the happiest years I remembered, free of my father's threats during the nights. But my mother could not stay away. She pined for him. She lost weight. And sometimes, unbeknownst to us, she went back to Cheltenham at night to the family home, where our father remained, to check on him. Her guilt was so powerful to see him abandoned.

Why our father should introduce all of us, sons and daughters alike, to the passions of sexual desire before we were equipped to handle it remains an unanswered question. And even though my mother knew before she married him that his own father had been jailed for Ontucht, old Dutch for sexual licentiousness—most likely incest given my aunt, my father's nineteen year old sister brought the charges in 1942—it is as if it never occurred to my mother the same thing might happen under his care to her own daughter. The generational repeat.

I once thought my mother was gutless for not leaving my father for good, as in my mind then, she should have. I see it as far more complex these days. Her decision to stay with an abusive husband was complicated—like Munro's decision to stay with her second husband and the decision of countless women everywhere to stay with abusive partners even when these men have so

thoroughly dishonoured themselves and their children by sexually abusing them.

The problem is greater than my story. It is systemic. It goes back to societal structures making it almost impossible for women to leave their abusive husbands while also failing to address the needs of abusive men, who, as Jess Hill suggests, cannot bear the weight of their own shame at their needs and dependency, so they lash out on those most vulnerable, their children, as a source of relief from their frustration. Some breach the bounds of human decency, the incest taboo, and approach their child as if she's an adult by imposing their sexual desires on her. They introduce her to adult passion when, as his child, she seeks only tenderness and care. As Ferenczi argues, the child, like her mother, is muddled about her position in the scheme of family. What position does she hold except as her father's secret concubine? Her position in life is to gratify him in return for care, a type of Stockholm syndrome, where we form attachments to our abusers in the belief that they alone can keep us safe.

Salter writes about situations of prolonged sexual abuse when women are held prisoner by their fathers, either literally or through psychologically coercive means. He offers the story of Grace to help us understand better "the interplay of familial, social, and political factors that entrap girls and women within prolonged incestuous abuse" (Salter 146). In these situations, women are imprisoned for prolonged periods, such as the notorious case of Josef Fritzl, who held his daughter, Elisabeth Fritzl, as a prisoner in a hidden bunker under the family home for twenty-four years. In this instance, the mother, Rosemarie Fritzl, denied knowing anything about the abuse. Salter cites several other such cases, which, because of their sensational nature, garnered worldwide attention. The women's imprisonment was often a function of emotional control and coercion "rather than iron bars and locked doors" (Salter, 146). And in such instances, media treatment has often been neglectful or ambivalent. There is also an expectation, following such prolonged ordeals, that these women will not be able to function as capable human beings. This takes us back to the notion that victims must appear as such. Otherwise, they are seen as complicit somehow, and mothers in such situations are also implicated.

To give an example of common responses to such situations, a comment was posted on Reddit about the Fritzl case and the mother's involvement: "Do you think Rosemarie Fritzl knew of her husband's crimes? He was convicted of raping others while he was married and served 12 months out of an 18-month sentence. They also had a tenant living in their home on the ground floor for 12 years or something???" ("Do You Think"). Either she did not know, keeping her head in the sand, or she knew and was an accomplice. The lack of empathy and understanding of the complexity of such situations is telling. As Herman

states, "A man's home is his castle; rarely is it understood that the same home may be a prison for women and children" (*Trauma* 72).

There was once an essentially biological view that women unconsciously selected their partners for the value of their genetic make-up to assist in the reproduction of children. This view ignores the complex interplay of biology and human constructions of personhood over time. With the introduction of contraception, women no longer need to hunker down to a life of domestic drudgery. So, the picture is more complex.

But the shadows of the past remain. With women still the second sex, and children collateral damage, is it the fault of mothers who could not protect their children from patriarchy, which, as Hill argues, positions people on an entitlement spectrum, with white men at the top? As Hill writes, "We are born longing for connection, for tenderness, to love and be loved. Patriarchy seeks to override those aural feelings in boys—to literally sever their capacities for emotional connection—by rendering those feelings weak and shameful" (112).

Is this not the essence of the sexual abuse of children? The projection of pain onto the smallest one, which can then make us feel bigger because we cannot handle our own vulnerability? Certainly, my father could not handle his. And my mother went out of her way to help him with it, in unhelpful ways that then enabled him. Could she have behaved differently, given the lack of support within her church and community, given the secrecy that surrounds incest generally, and given the fact that she had no money or power? How could she indeed? The unspeakable nature of incest leaves mothers more responsible than they are, thereby distancing perpetrators from the need to take responsibility. This feeds our societal failure to understand more what drives incest in the first place, not as the fault of mothers but as an issue of patriarchal power and control. This reality leaves children even more vulnerable in the face of abusive fathers.

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