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—AYELET WALDMAN, author of *Bad Mother and Love and Other Impossible Pursuits*

my lie

A True Story of False Memory

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MARAN PHOTO © CORI WELLS BRAUN

My Father, My Lie

A daughter's quest for truth takes a troubling turn.

This essay is adapted from *My Lie: A True Story of False Memory*, published last month by Jossey-Bass.

The worst day of my life was the day I remembered that my father had sexually abused me as a child.

The second-worst day of my life was eight years later, when I realized that he hadn't.

In 1988, when I accused my father, I was in my mid-30s, living with my two young sons in a tiny house in Oakland. I was recently divorced from their dad, in love with a woman for the first time.

Thrilled and terrified by my shiny new sexual orientation, I dove heart-first into the safety (or so it seemed) of "wimmin's culture." I shopped in wimmin's bookstores, danced with wimmin in wimmin's bars to wimmin's music, and taught wimmin's writing classes, which turned into group therapy sessions, as every gathering of feminists seemed to do. My lover, my friends, my students, most of the women I knew (and I knew mostly women) were all at work on the same project: excavating our childhoods, taking tiny brushes to the dig sites of our pain.

At 59, now, with adult sons I miss every day and an 83-year-old father I know I'll be missing soon, I write those words and I think, What pain? What was so bad back then? I began and ended my days cuddling with my soft, sweet boys. Endless possibilities, not knee replacement surgery, awaited me. Gas

was \$1.30 a gallon; my mortgage was \$950 a month.

But in those days my suffering—our suffering, the personal as well as the political—seemed too big to ignore. So we did what people like us do, people who don't have access to village elders or shamans (shawimmins?). We went to therapy. We went to therapy as if we were dying of thirst and therapy was water—once, twice, three times a week. Our therapists gave us what we begged them for: a one-word explanation for every psychological bump, bruise, and break.

Incest. A century earlier, Freud had called it the cause of his female patients' "hysteria." Later, caving to peer pressure, he'd argued that his patients' incest memories were fantasies, not facts. But then in the 1980s, feminist researchers found that Freud had gotten it right the first time around. One in three American women had been victims of child sexual abuse, their studies proved. *One in three.*

Across the country, suddenly, daycare workers were being arrested for sadistically abusing the toddlers in their care. Accused fathers were facing down their 30-something daughters in court. Oprah Winfrey, Suzanne Somers, Roseanne Barr, and a former Miss America went public as abuse survivors. Survivors with multiple names and personalities were showing up on Geraldo and Donahue.

"Don't you think it's suspicious," a friend asked me one Saturday morning as we were driving to a workshop for part-

ners of incest survivors, "that your father has hated everyone you've ever dated?"

My mouth went dry. My dad had always been possessive. And until I was a teenager, we'd been close in a kind of creepy way. *Triangulation*, my co-counselor diagnosed it. *Classic incestuous dynamic.* "No wonder you've always had a hard time with your mother," she said. "The two of you were competing for your dad."

True: my dad and I used to do everything together. Things my mother didn't like to do with him, like sneaking out at dawn for White Castle hamburger breakfasts, and handicapping the horses at Aqueduct. I played my dad's trumpet in my elementary school orchestra. He and I acted out the screenplays he'd written before I was born.

But then I grew breasts and my own interests and lost interest in my dad's. Everything I wanted, suddenly, was forbidden—especially my first boyfriend, Carl. The first time they met, my father took in Carl's wild Jewfro and Dylan-esque, diffident sneer and shoved him out the door. "You are never to see that boy again," he said.

And just like that, my hero became my enemy. I wasn't my father's best friend anymore; I became his prisoner. At age 16, after a couple of years of door-slammings, face-slapping battles, I ran away from home.

For the next 20 years my father and I maintained an uneasy truce. He divorced my mother and moved to a different country and married Gloria,

a woman six years older than I. My brother and I both got married and moved to the same city and started having kids. Our father was our kids' only living grandfather, but he was a stranger to them. Increasingly he was a stranger to me.

When I wrote to tell my dad that I'd divorced my husband and was happily involved with a woman, he wrote back (I'm paraphrasing, but not by much), "Good riddance to the husband. Too bad about the perverted homosexual relationship." We didn't communicate very often after that.

For my 37th birthday, my best friend gave me the book everyone was reading in 1988: *The Courage to Heal: A Guide For Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*. "Mer," she inscribed it, "I know you have *The Courage to Heal*."

The book was chock-full of checklists of symptoms and signs. I turned the pages, recognizing my own memories and feelings on every list. As the evidence mounted, my belly churned. Could my father be one of those fathers? Could I have been one of those little girls?

I started having incest dreams. *I'm running through Central Park, knowing that it's against the law to run there unless you were molested as a child. I decide that if a cop stops me, I'll say I was molested as a child. And then I realize that it's true.*

I tell a therapist what really happened to me as a child: that I was raped when I was very young. She nods and says she's known it all along.

"Dreams don't lie," my girlfriend murmured when I woke up crying in the night. That's true, I thought.

Once I started wondering what I'd forgotten, I could hardly think about anything else. I started seeing an incest therapist, carrying my copy of *The Courage to Heal*, bulging with yellow Post-Its, exhibits One Through Infinity in the case against my dad. Week after week I read to her from the list I kept in my "incest journal." "What Makes Me Think I Was Molested." *The weekend away with my father, age 10; no memory after entering hotel. Bladder infection—age 8. He married a woman six years older than I am.*

"I know he did it," I told my therapist on December 15, 1988. Instantly I was drenched in relief. The torture of wondering was over. No words had ever tasted truer in my mouth.

One by one I devastated my family members with the news that my father had molested me. I told my father not to call me or my kids.

Eight years and many, many recovered memories later, my girlfriend and I were in our couples counselor's office, having our usual fight. "You don't believe my abuse ever happened," she said. "You don't even believe in your own."

For years, I'd been denying her accusations of the survivor's ultimate betrayal, disbelief. "You're right," I confessed now.

When she moved out I was grief-struck and stunned. If I wasn't an incest survivor, who

were my people? Who was I, and why had I destroyed my family? I'd accused my mother of failing to protect me. My brother had raised his daughter at a distance, afraid to touch her the wrong way. My teen-aged sons hadn't seen their grandfather since they were 7 and 8 years old. How could I begin to undo the damage I'd done?

On July 16, 1996, I sent my father a birthday card for the first time in eight years.

"Dear Dad," I wrote, "I'm sorry. If you can find it in your heart to forgive me, I'd like to see you. Love, Meredith."

He called me the next day. His voice was as familiar to me as my own. He invited us to come hang out at his pool on Sunday. He told me I was welcome to bring my girlfriend. I said we'd broken up. "I'm sorry to hear that," he said.

There he was, weaving his way through the poolside chaises: navy blue swim trunks, bare feet, unsteady smile. My dad.

He was grayer than I'd remembered him. Shorter. He'd been so much bigger in my head. We reached for each other, squirming in and out of an awkward hug. Of course he's afraid to touch me, I thought. I felt it in my bones, the depth of the fracture I'd caused.

"Hi, Grandpa." My older son wrapped his furry blond arms around my father's furry gray chest. My father patted him on the back and turned to my younger son. They shook hands.

"Did you bring your suits?" my father asked. Eager to escape the tension, the boys chased each other into the pool. My father led me across the hot cement to two chaises pushed close together. He arranged his fleshy body on the shaded one. He knew I loved to lie in the sun.

We watched my kids racing the length of the pool, all whitewater and bobbing heads and big flashing feet. "They're so tall," my father said.

"They have a competition going," I said.

"Who's winning?" A small grin played at the corners of my dad's mouth—my mouth, my younger son's mouth.

"Are you handicapping them?" I teased him.

"Who's the favorite?" he shot back.

I was always your favorite, I thought. And we all paid the price. "It's neck and neck," I said.

My dad gestured at them, my older son's sun-streaked hair streaming down his back, drops of water clinging to my younger son's shaved head.

"Hair and head, you mean," he said, and I looked at him and rolled my eyes, and then we laughed together. And just like that we started making our way back to each other, no questions answered, no questions asked. ●

Meredith Maran is the award-winning Oakland author of several best-selling nonfiction books including *Class Dismissed* and *What It's Like to Live Now*.