

Relationships

[TWO-MINUTE MEMOIR]

My Lie

I falsely accused my father of the worst betrayal possible. He'd brushed off my apologies, but redemption was now or never.

By Meredith Maran

“**Y**OU LOOK funny,” my dad said as I approached him. He looked me up and down. “Did you always dress like that?”

Why *did* I wear a clinging top to talk to my father about incest, I asked myself.

“Oh, for God’s sake, Stan,” my stepmother, Gloria, said from behind him.

Shaking her head, she gave me a hug and pulled us into the living room.

“The strangest thing happened last night,” my father told me. “Or was it this morning? I woke up at two o’clock. It was dark outside, and I thought it was the middle of the day.”

“You’re eighty-one years old, Dad,” I said. “You’re entitled to be confused. I get confused sometimes, too.”

I swear I heard a whoosh, felt a breeze as the ghost of my razor-sharp father slipped back into the body of this old,



DADDY'S GIRL
The author, at a year old, with her father, in 1952.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MEREDITH MARAN

muddled man. "Gloria," he said, deadpan. "Call the old-folks' home. See if they'll give us a father-daughter discount for two."

IN 1988, WHEN I was 37, I accused my father of molesting me. I didn't see him or talk to him for eight years. I didn't let my kids see him for eight years, either. At the time, I was a reporter covering the "recovered memory" phenomenon sweeping the country. A toxic cocktail of overzealous therapists and a media frenzy playing out in the background convinced untold numbers of Americans that they'd repressed traumatic incest memories. I was dating an incest survivor. I was teaching a women's writing class; nearly every student was writing an

order to become fully myself—to "get him out of me, once and for all." But no, he hadn't sexually abused me.

I was one of the lucky ones. In 1996, when I came to my senses and apologized to my family, they forgave me—or appeared to have forgiven me. We never spoke of my false accusation. But I found myself wondering: Had the wounds I'd inflicted really healed? Or had the memory of my false memory become one of those scarred-over but still-festering family wounds?

Despite my father's repeated insistence that we "let sleeping dogs lie," in 2009, as his health began to fail, I decided to try again to tell him how profoundly sorry I was—while there was still time.

My dad turned back to me. "I told Gloria I was more likely to bat for the Giants tomorrow than I was to do that to my daughter."

His expression changed. Mad Dad.

"It was unbelievable that I wasn't even speaking to you," he said. "I had a plan. I was going to wait until you forgot about me. Then I'd call you and say, 'Listen here. This is crazy.' I thought I'd benefit from the element of surprise."

I swallowed hard. "I never forgot about you, Dad."

"I called your mother, too," he went on. "I asked her if there could be any truth to what you were saying."

Oh my God. If he wasn't sure he didn't do it, how could I be sure? "You called

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unpublishable sexual abuse memoir. I was living on Planet Incest.

After someone gave me a copy of *The Courage to Heal*, a wildly popular book that led many to think of themselves as abuse victims, I started having nightmares about my own father molesting me. My friends, my lover, my counselor told me not to doubt the visions. I didn't need to "prove" anything, they insisted—I just needed to believe my "memories."

Years later, after I exiled myself from Planet Incest, I realized that it wasn't true. I (and many, many others) realized that my memories were false: metaphors, not facts.

Yes, my dad had been alternately neglectful and intrusive, distracted and authoritarian, absent and self-absorbed. Yes, I needed to separate from him in

"LET'S SIT DOWN," Gloria said. My father lowered himself slowly into the grey leather recliner where he spent his days, reading the paper, watching baseball games and black-and-white movies on TV. Gloria waved me into the "Hers" recliner that matched my dad's. She sat facing us, perched on a silk damask chair.

For ten years my father had sworn there was nothing for us to talk about. Now, old age be damned, he had a speech prepared.

"When it happened," he said without preamble, "I thought you'd come to your senses in a few days." He frowned, grasping at memory. "But then I kept calling you, and you wouldn't talk to me." He turned to Gloria. "Did we have caller ID then?"

"No," she said gently.

Mom?" I blurted. "And that's how you decided that you didn't molest me?"

"You know how it is," my father said. "You hear something often enough, you start to believe it's true."

"Oh, yes," I said. "I do know how that is."

My father's eyes glazed over. "Is it time for lunch?" he asked Gloria.

"We had lunch an hour ago, Stan," Gloria answered. "Right now you're talking to your daughter."

My father shook his head, loosening cobwebs. "Your mother was adamant that nothing happened," he told me. "So finally I said, 'To hell with Meredith. If this doesn't stop, I'm going to take her to court.'"

"I can understand why you'd disown me," I said.

Had the memory of my false memory become one of those scarred-over but still-festering family wounds?

"I'm sure worse things have happened to me," my father said. "But if you asked me to name the second-worst thing," he added, "I couldn't tell you what it was."

Body blow. That's what I'm here for, I reminded myself. To hear his truth. To tell him mine.

"When you accused your father of abusing you," Gloria interjected, "I started looking at him with totally different eyes. I couldn't sleep at night. I thought, 'Am I lying here next to a child molester?'"

She gazed at me intently. "I almost left my husband," she said.

"I remember," I said. How could I forget our lunch in 1989, when she'd asked me if she should?

"I thought I knew him pretty well," Gloria continued. "But there were all those stories in the paper at the time, mothers who didn't know their husbands were molesting their daughters."

"I know," I said. "I wrote some of those stories."

My father peered at me. "Was it true, what you wrote?" As opposed to what you said, he meant.

"I interviewed the daughters. I'm sure they were telling the truth." Unlike me, I meant.

Mad Dad reappeared. "What I really want to know," he said, "is how the hell you could have thought that of me."

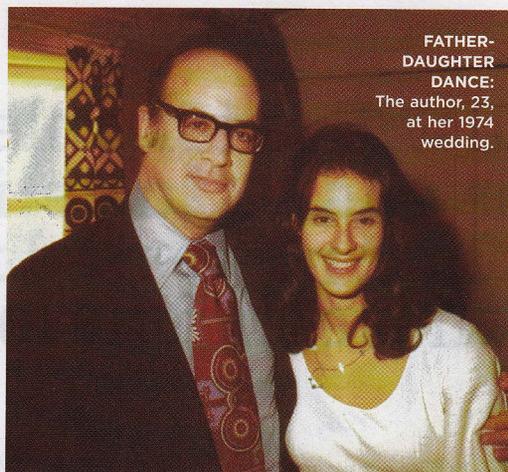
"I was wrong to accuse you. I'll regret it for the rest of my life," I answered slowly, carefully, tiptoeing across the tightrope of my complicated truth. "But I don't think it could have happened if we'd had a better relationship when I was a kid."

"There was always a big void in our relationship," my father said dreamily, as

if he were in a trance. "In those days, men were supposed to provide for their wives and children. That's what I did. But I wasn't the kind of father your brother is. The kind of father I wish I'd been."

I smiled at him through welling tears. "You weren't such a bad dad," I said.

"I wasn't such a great dad, either," he said. "But I've always loved you."



FATHER-DAUGHTER DANCE: The author, 23, at her 1974 wedding.

I gulped around the lump in my throat. "I've never heard you say that before." I realized with a terrible clarity that it was easier to believe that my father had molested me than it was to believe that he loved me.

"You were always something special, right from the start." I watched my father drifting, nostalgia washing over his pale face. "You never walked. You ran. The first time we put you in your crib, you'd climbed out of it by the time we turned around."

My dad peered at me, and I knew what he was seeing. I saw through my kids that way, too: back through time, unchanged in memory.

My belly softened. "I love you, too,"

I said.

"I feel very much at ease with you, Meredith," my father said. "The closer to now we get, the better it's been."

"Our relationship, you mean?" I asked, wanting to be sure.

My dad nodded, pleased to be understood, and I realized that I'd been doing this all my life: interpreting my father— ascribing meaning to what he'd said and hadn't said, what he'd done and hadn't done.

Until this moment, it had never occurred to me that the words and deeds he chose were up to him, but the meanings I chose to extract from his words and his deeds—they were up to me.

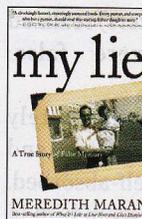
"I don't think it ever stopped growing," my dad said. He blinked at me, his expression pensive.

This is what I've wanted all my life, I thought. My father really talking to me. Really listening to me. Really seeing me.

"Dad," I asked after a decade of wondering, "do you forgive me?"

My father's brow furrowed with concentration. Then he said, with great intensity, "Gloria. What are we having for lunch?"

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