

**WOMEN'S STUDIES CELEBRATION**  
Women's History Month 2005

**NOMINATION: Papers and projects done in completion of course work for Spring, Summer and Fall 2004 eligible for nomination. Students do not need to be enrolled Fall 2004 or Spring 2005 to be eligible.**  
(Students are encouraged to identify works they would like nominated and approach their professor to initiate the process.)

Instructor Sheila Smith, Jan Bogstad Dept. Adult Health Nursing, Collections Development, WMNS

Course Number and Name Graduate Directed Study Semester completed Fall'04

Title of Nominated Work Aftershock: The Twisted Aftereffects of Incest

**CATEGORY:** Sampson:  
Undergraduate Research Paper      See  
Undergraduate Project      Olson XX  
Graduate XX Kessler       
Turell       
Belter     

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**\*\*WHY DO YOU, THE INSTRUCTOR, RECOMMEND THIS AS AN EXEMPLARY STUDENT PAPER/PROJECT? (Attach a separate sheet.)**

As the nominating instructor, please notify the student and ask them to turn in the paper, or attach to your nomination form.

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**Awards are sponsored by the UW-Eau Claire Foundation, Helen X. Sampson Fund, and by private individuals. Research involving human subjects must conform to the guidelines given by the Institutional Research Board. Contact Research Services, 836-3405, with questions.**

**Submission deadline is February 11, 2005.**

**Julianne Johnson**

**Aftershock: The Twisted Aftereffects of Incest**

**Reasons for Recommending this Paper:**

Julie is in the masters program in the English department, working toward a goal of publication as an author and illustrator. She considers her main area to be children's literature, which *Aftershocks* clearly is not, but which I think demonstrates her skills and abilities in crafting an important story, in this case combined with a valuable educational message on the prevalence and effects of incest. Julie has done a superb job of personalizing the horrific effects of incest as well as raising awareness as to how deep, far and wide those effects penetrate, through personal lives, family and social systems. The structural approach of her paper, alternating story with factual information, creates a reflective dialogue that works to make the story readable by giving the reader periodic but purposeful and well-placed breaks from the impact of the violence she describes. The end result is a powerful emotional effect, appreciation of a heretofore unrepresented point of view (that of the unaware and consequently horribly manipulated later-life spouse), and a valuable public educational contribution. The factual information is well researched, well organized, and based on appropriate references. It also serves to make the story more meaningful and believable by providing an objective reference point against which to gauge the content and dynamics of the story. Overall Julie has done a wonderful job communicating the devastating effects of incest. By presenting the story from the point of view of the estranged and traumatized later-life spouse, her work contributes identification and beginning awareness of a previously neglected victim while honoring the destruction to many lives and the humbling need to gather resources and go on.

Sheila Smith, Professor

Adult Health Nursing & Women's Studies

Jan Bogstad, Professor

Collections Development & Women's Studies

Julianne Johnson

**Aftershock:**  
**The Twisted Aftereffects of Incest**

Fiction and Fact

**FICTION STORY:**

His large silver Tahoe was there in the driveway. He was home – no sign that he was outside. Pulling in front of the garage, she had opened her car door before she even stopped the car. She had no feeling of covering the ground to the house - of bolting up the front steps two at a time. She swung open the door. She heard him in the kitchen and felt a fierce rage inside. He was sitting at the kitchen counter only feet from her eating his lunch, his large shoulders in a hunched-over posture.

She slammed her hand on the counter. "Okay, you tell me what's going on here! Your counselor just told me you incested your daughter. She said you incested her! You tell me what happened - now!" The words were hard and blunt. She could barely hold back her anger. She struggled for control, caught between tears and angry hysteria.

"Huh? ...what are you talking about?" he responded, looking up, puzzled.

"Your counselor wouldn't have lied to me. You lied to me! She told me to ask you for the details. She said the whole thing is confidential. What are the details! What does she mean that you committed incest with your daughter?"

He stood up and half turned, intending to remain silent, to leave. She cornered him so that his back was to the kitchen counter and he had nowhere to move.

"What do you want me to tell you...that I had relations with my daughter?" he demanded.

"Yes, I want you to tell me...and I want to know what lies you've told to me." "What did you do to her?" Sharon's body was intense with anger.

"You want to know if I touched her?" he asked.

"Yes!" she said, too loudly. Her body was shaking. "You've brought this ugly thing into my life...and I want to know it all. Did you have intercourse with her?"

"Well, not...well..." He wouldn't go on.

"Did you touch her skin to skin?"

"Yeah"

"Her vagina? where...where did you touch here?"

"Well, yes, I touched her...more..." he responded flatly. After a pause he stumbled out ... "but I didn't penetrate her."

"Did you come?"

"Yes... I did." He paused. "Do you really want to know this?"

"What are you thinking? ...Yes, I want to know. I have a right to know!" she glared, eyes unblinking. "I've been married to you seven years, and I find out now I know nothing. I don't even know who or what you are! How old was she?"

"It happened when she was ten...and... till she was fourteen. "

"What! And it was kept secret?" She was numb, realizing when she married him she had brought her fourteen-year-old daughter into the marriage...into a potential ghastly danger. "Nothing was done?" she said, not knowing how to deal with the overwhelming information.

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## **FACTS:**

Incest should be and must be brought out of its closet. I feel we can only gain health by defining this crime no differently than we would an instance of theft, rape or assault. Yet it is far more severe than theft, for it steals innocence – childhood - and normalcy from its victims and all those connected to the incest, whether as a primary victim, or as a secondary victim. If incest becomes a household word, then perhaps we, as a nation, can begin keeping it out of the house - your house and mine. Incest should be a word that people are not afraid to say or hear, not recoil at its mention. People should not be afraid to listen, whether it is to the children, or to grown children who carry the scars. Most important, the condemning stigmas should not be attached to the victims, primary or secondary. They need to be able to live as normal people, not forced to keep

up a façade with secrecy, not afraid that they will be shunned if they disclose their secret. This should be a situation of exposure and condemnation of the offender – the offender only – and secrecy should not be an option.

The stigma of incest can only be reduced by placing the crime in the normal legal setting as for all other legal offences – and doing away with the secrecy that prevents legal action. Secrecy ensures perpetration. The identification and treatment of the offender should be legally addressed, made “public knowledge,” no less visible than our knowledge of a convicted sexual abuser who is *not a family relation*. When incest is addressed as a crime and the punishment and rehabilitation programs are visible to the public eye, then people will know how to deal with it, especially how to deal it.

Incest is a word people should comfortably have in their vocabulary, so that the problem can be addressed and stopped – so we can end the “conspiracy of silence” that surrounds it, and protect innocent children.

**Definition:**

“Incest” is defined as “the sexual abuse of a child by a relative or other person in a position of trust and authority over the child. It is a violation of a child [in the place] where he or she lives” (Vanderbilt, ncvc). Another source defines incest as “sexual relations of any kind perpetrated by a biologically or non-biologically related person functioning in the role of a family member” (ncvc). By criminal law it is defined as: “a “forcible sexual offense,” [which is] any sexual act directed against another person, forcibly and/or against that person's will; or not forcibly or against the person's will where the victim is incapable of giving consent” (jsu.edu).

Further investigation of incest broadens the definition: (from Caruso, ncvc)

- Sexual contact or interaction between family members who are not marital partners
- Oral-genital contact, genital or anal penetration, genital touching of the victim by the perpetrator; any other touching of private body parts, sexual kissing and hugging
- Sexually staring at the victim by the perpetrator, accidentally or disguised
- Touching of the victim's body by the perpetrator
- Verbal invitations to engage in sexual activity
- Verbal ridiculing of body parts
- Showing of pornographic photography and reading of sexually explicit material to children
- Exposure to inappropriate sexual activity

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**FICTION STORY, continued:**

"What made it end?" Sharon's body tensed with emotion.

"I told my wife what I'd been doing." He acted so cool, so casual, it disturbed her more.

"And your daughter had said nothing...told no one in all that time?"

"I guess not...no one acted like they knew?" he replied. "I guess something could have been done, but my wife didn't want to do anything...didn't want anyone to know. She decided we would go to therapy, counseling. We did it for four years."

"Who had therapy?"

"The whole family."

"And who was the counselor?"

"The counselor we're seeing now. The one we saw just before we got married."

"How...why...did your wife accept it? Accept just do to counseling? Why did she do nothing else?"

"She decided we should just keep it a secret. She didn't want to mess up the kid's lives any more than they had been. We changed doctors, dentists, everything."

"Was yours considered some *mild* form of incest?"

"No," he said uncomfortably, "it was considered at the criminal level."

"You weren't arrested? ...It didn't go to trial?"

"I guess I could have been."

"And...okay..." she paused, bracing herself for what she was about to ask. "Who knew?"

"The whole family - everyone."

"What! The family I've been part of for seven years! The family that's treated me and my daughter marginally, like we didn't exist, like we were somehow horrible. How sick this is!" Her posture stiffened and she clenched her fists with her rage. "Who is everyone?"

"All my family... all my brothers and sisters. I had to tell them as part of the counseling. I didn't have to tell my mom, though. We decided she was too old, and it might...well, she might have not been able to take it."

"You're saying that when I married you, everyone knew...knew all of this...and no one said a word?"

"Yes, I guess that's true."

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### **FACTS: Statistics**

Incest remains one of the most under-reported and least discussed crimes in our nation. It has been cited as the most common form of child abuse. "Incest and sexual abuse are at epidemic proportions" ([coolnurse.com /sexual](http://coolnurse.com/sexual)).

- "An almost international taboo, incest often remains concealed by the victim because of guilt, shame, fear, social and familial pressure... as well as pressure or threats from the abuser" (Matsakis, ncvc)
- "It happens in families that are financially-privileged, as well as those of low socio-economic status ([coolnurse](http://coolnurse.com))
- It happens to those of all racial and ethnic descent ([coolnurse](http://coolnurse.com))

- Current statistics suggest that one out of four females is sexually abused by the time she reaches the age of 18, with about 75% of the perpetrators being family members (Coolnurse)
- Studies conclude that 43 % of the children who are abused are abused by family members, 33 % are abused by someone they know” (Hayes, ncvc)  
“Research indicates that 46% of children who are raped are victims of family members” (Langan & Harlow, ncvc)
- Research indicates that over 10 million Americans have been victims of incest (Hayes, ncvc)
- 16,000 new cases occur annually...[and] 1,000,000 Americans are victims of father-daughter incest” (Finkelhor, ncvc)
- Of the majority of American rape victims, “61% were raped before the age of 18....29% of all forcible rapes occurred when the victim was less than 22 years old...AND 11% of these rape victims were raped by their fathers or stepfathers” (National Center for Victims of Crime and Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center, ncvc).
- “A 1991 sample of state prisoners serving time for violent crime showed that, of those prisoners convicted of sexual assault, two-thirds had victimized children and almost one-third of the victims were the children or step-children of the assailant” (Greenfeld, ncvc)

While these statistics may seem surprisingly high and shocking, discrepancy exists in the estimated number of incest victims because many cases of incest are not reported. “Incest remains an extremely under-reported crime...and there continues to be an extreme reluctance to reveal abuse and to obtain help” (Matsakis, ncvc). In many cases, the occurrences of incest in low-income and minority families are the ones not disclosed and reported. Statistics are significantly low because “they are based primarily on accounts of white, middle-class women and do not adequately represent low-income and minority women” (Matsakis, ncvc).



'Silence' is the single most crucial component of incest, ensuring its secrecy. All offenders need and use secrecy to assault children (Glasser, secasa). As a result, victims of incest are often extremely reluctant to - often fearful of - revealing that they are being abused because "their abuser is a person in a position of trust and authority for the victim" (coolnurse). Many incest victims fear they will be disbelieved, blamed or punished if they report their abuse.

In addition, often incest is not exposed because "incest victims do not understand, or they deny, that anything is wrong with the behavior they are encountering" (Vanderbilt, ncvc). In response to their trauma, we know of case studies where victims of incest have formed a biochemically-induced amnesia, triggered by the sexual assault. In others, the trauma "causes a number of complex endocrine and neurological changes resulting in complete or partial memory loss regarding the event... and in repression of the incident(s)" (Matsakis, ncvc).

"Most research concludes that girls and women have a substantially higher risk of being sexually assaulted than males" (Matsakis, ncvc). However, estimates of male incest [are considered to] be low due to the fact that boys are even more hesitant than girls to disclose incest... are reluctant to admit incest victimization because of their response to the sexual details, and a fear that it may indicate weakness and/or homosexuality, which can result in negative social stigmatization [without our society] (Vanderbilt, ncvc).

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**FICTION STORY, continued:**

She would have liked to hit him, but he outweighed her by a hundred pounds and his massive body, at six foot four, kept her at a distance. He seemed huge and the kitchen suddenly seemed very small. Sharon had learned to always stay at a distance. He had grabbed her once, when she'd demanded that he stop belittling her daughter, comparing her to his own successful-smart-ones. He'd grabbed her finger and bent it back so far she'd thought he would break it off. His anger had been frightening and had made her realize how easily he could hurt her badly.

"The letter your ex-wife sent," she said backing away, "...before we got married...that we took to your counselor. Your counselor said I shouldn't read it - that it was full of lies and distortions. What was in it?"

He didn't respond.

"Your ex-wife tried to tell me, didn't she? And you...and the counselor... covered it up... Didn't you!" She felt sick. Her stomach tightened, flooding itself with acid.

She stepped back from him, exasperated suddenly with herself. "I would never have brought my daughter into this! Oh, my God!" She paused, awareness hitting her bluntly as she remembered the session with the counselor before their marriage. "Remember! The counselor told me your ex-wife had lots of unresolved issues...and that you were fine. Ha! I remember she said you'd worked through your therapy and she felt there was nothing to worry about - nothing wrong with you." Her eyes opened wide with distress. "She said I shouldn't read the letter. God, how dumb was I?" She pressed her hands against her temples. "What happened to that letter? Where the hell did that letter go?"

"I destroyed it."

"God..." She dropped onto one of the kitchen stools, feeling weak. "You incested your kids... How many?"

"Just one, the oldest."

“Just... No, no wonder she would never have anything to do with us...never came to the wedding. You said it was because she was angry that you hadn’t written a letter for her counselor.”

“I’d taken enough blame!” he said angrily. “They didn’t need to keep blaming me over and over. I didn’t need to write another letter about it – again and again.”

He shoved his soup bowl across the counter and the broth splattered out. She looked up to say more, but he had turned and headed toward the garage door, conversation decidedly ended. He slammed the door behind him.

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**FACTS: Theories:** (all material summarized from secasa website)

Several theories try to explain incest. They also try to look at a manner in which to deal with it. Several, however, help to perpetuate the act by considering it within “normal” male sexual behavior which is regarded as uncontrollable.

(1) **Freud’s Psychoanalytic Theory** was the earliest proposed explanation for the occurrence of sexual abuse. Freud postulated from his clinical work with female patients that the trauma of childhood sexual abuse resulted in their later psychic damage, He presented his findings as his Seduction Theory, at a major forum in Vienna in 1896. He was ridiculed and shunned by his peers who, in conservative 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, found the idea that fathers were sexually abusing their daughters an outrage.

Freud was so affected by the response to his Seduction Theory that he never publicly referred to it again. He instead developed his now classic Theories of Psycho-Sexual Development in which he created the theoretical constructs of ‘penis-envy’ and the ‘Oedipus Complex’ to explain the occurrence of incest - casting the daughter as the ‘active desiring agent,’ who seeks out her father as her ‘love-object.’ These theories

claim that children naturally pass through a stage in which they are sexually attracted to their parents. Thus he showed that the sexual acts between parents and children are natural, rather than abusive, and placed blame, not on the perpetrator, but on the child 'victim'. In essence, Freud developed an elaborate theoretical framework to deny the reality of childhood incest. Framing the child as the 'seductress, the father was then seen as the passive, innocent object of his daughter's seductive intentions – the victim.

Many of the myths and false ideas about sexual assault and incest that are common today can be traced back to Freud's model.

Further, his Psychoanalytic Theory presented the view that most sex offenders and rapists as disturbed individuals and sexual psychopaths, not ordinary fatherly sorts. Today we now know that the vast majority of men who commit incest are free of any mental illness.

**(2) The Family Dysfunction Approach** focuses on the family unit as being dysfunctional and identifies incest as a symptom of "family maladjustment." The notion of the "dysfunctional family" was first proposed in the 1940's as an outgrowth of the emerging development of family psychiatry, which, noticeably, was based primarily on Freud's theories. This approach is one of the most widely held explanations for incest in the United States. It proposes that all members of the family are responsible for causing it to occur -especially the, perhaps unaware, mother.

The mother is presented as the cornerstone of family pathology. This approach proposes that the mother has failed fundamentally as a mother and wife – that she is a dysfunctional wife who does not fulfill her assigned role as the sexual provider for the husband. It proposes that she emotionally and physically distances herself from the

family, for instance, by working outside of the home, pursuing outside interests and activities, as well as focusing on such things as illness of self or others. Next, it proposes that the child, looking for a substitute for the absent mother's love, accepts the sexual advances of the "sex-starved father. In addition, it suggests that the mother often chooses to deny the occurrence of the incest, even following the shared confidences of the child.

The approach fails to explain very important facts - that two-thirds of all the sexual abuse of children occurs under very different circumstances and for many different reasons. It tragically displaces responsibility from the abuser to the whole family, and often just the mother. With regard to the myth that "the 'mother ignores the incest,' research shows that 73% of mothers do act when incest is disclosed."

**(3) The Psychological Approach** has a more realistic explanation of incest - it focuses responsibility on the abuser, rather than on the victim or the family. It identifies the existence of a "personality profile", as well as the "motivators" of sex offenders - proposing the existence of fixed and stable personality traits that are predictive of sex offenders:

- social introversion
- feelings of masculine inadequacy
- the need to exercise a high level of dominance and control in family relationships
- an adept ability to rationalize actions
- a tendency to displace responsibility and blame onto others rather than the self.

The approach recognizes that abusers come from all social backgrounds and are not confined to just socially or economically-deprived families; that they do not suffer

from any mental illness; and that the offenders often appear as the law-abiding 'guy-next-door' type. It also identifies 'the regressive abuser,' one who 'abuses in response to the occurrence of stress that exacerbates existing feelings of inadequacy and impairs normal impulse control thereby allowing abuse to occur.'

This approach, unfortunately, perpetuates the myth that it is 'poor male impulse control' that causes sexually abusive behavior against children, and implies that such abuse is a 'natural and normal part of male sexuality.' As long as sexually abusive behavior is seen as normal in the repertoire of male behavior, little can be done toward its prevention.

(4) **The Feminist Approach** began with the emergence of the women's movement in the 1960's and '70's, a time when people began to tell their experiences of sexual assault. As a result, more accurate identification of the problem became possible.

This approach provides the most adequate explanation of the motivation of sexual assault, identifying it as part of the complex interplay between existing social structures, conventional attitudes and socialization of children. In particular, it points out the patriarchal influences which have led to the differential gender socialization of males and females, and the unequal power relationships that exist between men and women, and adults and children, which are embedded within our social structures. Significantly, it identifies the abusers as responsible for initiating and maintaining sexual assault.

Feminist research has demonstrated that sexual abuse is not a problem of "pathological men" and "seductive women and children," but instead shows that sexual assault is an extension of the current legal, social, economic and political systems that reinforce male dominance over women and children. Men are socialized to view women

as a means to satisfy their emotional, sexual and daily needs – as objects. This construct can lead them also to generalize their “objectification” to children as a means to satisfy daily needs. Examinations of male power within the family show that abusers tend to see their wives and children as property, which they can exploit in anyway they wish, including sexually. Thus, within our patriarchal society incest tends to be viewed as an expression of 'normal' male-female relations.

Stereotypical male sexual socialization presents these values, feelings and attitudes about men’s biological/sexual drives:

- (1) men are socialized to express their dependency or intimacy needs through sex
- (2) men tend to have or use sex as a way to reconfirm their ego
- (3) many men may experience sexual arousal outside of the context of a relationship and direct their desires to the genitals of some other preferred sexual object, which may be those of a child. (Research has shown that sexually inadequate males may prefer a child as a sexual partner to bolster an inadequate adult ego)
- (4) men are socialized to desire sexual partners who are younger and smaller than themselves

Within the feminist view, rape and incest are seen as social acts rather than natural acts - that “incest is produced by a certain kind of society. It is not seen as an extension of human nature” (secasa). Importantly, it argues that if we attempt to treat rape and sexual abuse as a natural and inevitable part of human behavior, we will be able to do little about it. But if we view it as a social fact, it can be eliminated through social change.

It attributes responsibility to the abuser rather than to the mother or the victim. However, and unfortunately, it perpetuates the myth that all females are vulnerable,

socialized to be compliant, passive and paralyzed to offer any resistance, all of which reinforce many of the negative messages about the powerlessness of women – a negative image for women.

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**FICTION STORY, continued:**

Sharon sat on the stool, alone in the kitchen, crying.

“God, what do I do?” she shook her head, looking for help, or answers. “The counselor kept this hideous thing a secret! Illegal! That should be illegal! What is the hell was she thinking? How could she keep such a secret? Especially when I had a fourteen year old!” Her emotions rose and fell as she tried to make sense of her new knowledge. She suddenly felt unrestrained anger at the counselor whom she had just left an hour earlier and who, for weeks, had felt like a trusted friend and confidant. “What are her morals? God, I could strangle her!”

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The unraveling of Sharon’s life had started the previous year, when she’d had a talk with her husband’s middle daughter, then thirty, about her hope that their families might bond together more, identifying that it had been a hard and confusing seven years for her. She had begged the daughter to treat her daughter and her more nicely.

Her husband had left her to do the talk, alone. She had been mortified when he had suddenly gotten up from the dining room table, gone into the bedroom and locked the door.

His daughter had stood over her glaring, hands planted firmly on her hips. She remembered saying, “It hurts me that I’m treated this way, but it hurts me even more that you all ignore my daughter as if she’s not a person.” The daughter had remained silent. Her own husband, seated nearby, had acted uncomfortable, even fearful, dropping his head in his hands and rubbing his hands over his hair on large motions of distress. She had ended her monologue, quietly suggesting that the daughter think about what she’d said and respond later.

After the two gone, Sharon had felt immobile, caught between the aftershock of her attempted discussion and her anger rising at her husband, who had left her to do it



alone. When she demanded an explanation from him, he'd said that he couldn't talk to her - that she'd always felt he had been too strict, too angry, with her when she was little - and that she was the only one who now kept in contact with him. He'd said he couldn't do anything to make her angry.

A few weeks later a letter had arrived, addressed only to her, but her husband had noticed it in the mail. It was so heavy, she'd been afraid to open it. She felt it didn't contain good things. She read it several days later. It was full of hate and ultimatums, and demands that their family relationships stay just the way they were. The daughter said she hated her father and what he had done to their childhoods and that she would be spending the rest of her life trying to recover from it.

Sharon no idea what had gone on - and it distressed her. She also knew that if her husband ever saw the letter that the rejection and anger of the letter would devastate him. For ten months she kept it hidden from him, until during an angry confrontation, he forced her to give it to him.

Within moments he spiraled deeply into depression, experienced devastating emotional shock, became mute, sleepless.

They began counseling a few days later and continued, both apart and together, in an effort to work through the events and the emotional aftershock of the letter. Sharon became aware that she faced at a turning point in their relationship. She felt devastated by either of the choices she faced - remaining intact or separating

She soon found the choice would not be hers to make. Several weeks later, his depression turned into anger - anger directed at her. He blamed her for trying to sabotage his relationship with his daughter. His anger infused every moment of their day. He was not longer depressed; he was fired by anger.

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### **FACTS: Effects**

When children are sexually assaulted, they often do not understand what is happening. They may feel instinctively that it is wrong, but they are often confused and terrified about the consequences of telling, both for themselves, as well as for the adults

around them. They often believe the abuse is their fault - which causes them to remain silent - ensuring the secrecy the offender demands.

Adding to their confusion, some young children may find the assaults physically pleasurable. Often offenders begin their abuse with gentle genital stimulation that causes a physical responses within the child, as their bodies react automatically to the stimulation. This does not mean, however, that they enjoy the abuse, only that offender knows how to cause a reaction over which they have no control. They often do not tell of their abuse because they do not realize until adolescence that their experiences were abnormal.

It has been found that children are often drawn to the offenders because they receive extra attention which makes them feel special. Often they have a need for the extra attention, love and affection they perceive to receive. Many find it very difficult to say 'no' to these adults because they are people the child depends upon, loves and trusts (coolnurse). Importantly, in many cases, the act of saying 'no' does not prevent the offender from doing what he has planned ([feminish.com/rain.htm](http://feminish.com/rain.htm)).

Incest can have serious long-term effects on its victims. They suffer severely from lack of trust, low self esteem, and anger, especially repressed anger. "There is research which indicates that children who have been sexually abused by a relative suffer from even more intense guilt and shame, low self-esteem, depression and self-destructive behavior (such as substance abuse, sexual promiscuity and prostitution) than children who have been sexually assaulted by a stranger" (Matsakis, nvcv). Incest may lead to "self-hatred, alcoholism, drug addition, depression, eating disorders, the inability to trust and suicide and many other symptoms"(coolnurse). Rosen, in The World Split Open,

states: “Sandra Butler, the author of The Conspiracy of Silence: The Trauma of Incest (1978), helped end the silence that surrounded the subject of incest. Behind the doors of both affluent and impoverished homes, father, brothers, and other relatives sexually abused young girls with remarkable frequency. Sworn to silence, many of these victims grew up guilty, confused, traumatized, fearing men or compulsively searching for sex as a sign of love. Many women functioned only by repressing their memories of these incidents” (185). Repression becomes a significant coping mechanism for some, in contrast to unresolved anger and revenge for others.

Importantly, whether an incest victim endured an isolated incident of abuse or ongoing assaults over an extended period of time, the process of recovery is exceptionally painful and very difficult.

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#### **FICTION STORY, continued:**

A few weeks after the letter disclosure and after a month with increasingly unbearable back problems, Sharon faced a new and unexpected shock. She was diagnosed with spinal cord damage, and a prognosis that was untreatable and expected to be lifelong. Her doctors only plan was to follow her changes to monitor whether the condition would stabilize or become progressively worse.

The new crisis was all her angry husband needed to prompt him to walk out, hotly telling her that her illness would prevent him from following his dreams. “I’m leaving he’d also said, and you won’t come between my children and me. Sharon knew that underlying it all was the fact that he could not cope with her now knowing about the hidden secrets of his past.

He left her abruptly, severing all contact, leaving no means to contact him, with little to live on - as if trying to punish her.

In the year that followed, filled with medical examinations, she was alone, in need of help and support - having little. She found a new counselor, desperately needing help through the stress that was devastating her – needing someone to “hold her hand.” She knew she needed a stranger. Any mention of the incest to her family and friends left them speechless and cold. They didn’t know how to handle the knowledge of the incest. She had counseling twice weekly, and gained some financial assistance through food stamps.

He lived less than a year after he left. His body was found a week after his suicide. Sharon received the news for an awkward policeman.

“I s’pose you’ve already heard...your husband was found dead,” he said, standing uncomfortably outside her front door, hat held awkwardly in his hands. “He... was found this morning. In the basement of his apartment. We’ve been trying to reach you. He’s been dead for some time. ...I’d guess maybe even a week.”

“Do you know where the body’s being taken?” she asked, numb shock her only emotion, her mind parched by his words.

“No, I don’t. The family, his oldest daughter I think, made some arrangements. I think you could contact her.”

“I can’t,” Sharon said, knowing she couldn’t tell this poor awkward officer things that weren’t necessary, that she perhaps shouldn’t tell. “She has some hate thing for me for marrying her dad...” She knew she had to continue. “How awful,” she said, her head dropping to hide sudden pain. She looked up after a pause. “Maybe my lawyer will know.”

She stood awkwardly looking at the policeman. “Thank you,” she said. She watched him go to his car and back slowly out of the driveway and drive away.

Her lawyer informed her that they wouldn’t tell him anything. “They won’t release the name of the funeral home to you,” he said. “I talked to their lawyer. Maybe you can get the information from the police.”

Hours later, with the help of the police, she drove with a friend to the funeral home. A young man opened the large glass door of the funeral home and asked “Are you a family member?”

"Yes, I'm his wife," she replied.

"Thank goodness you've arrived?" he said excitedly. "We're supposed to do a cremation, but couldn't do it until you signed the papers. We had no way to find you. His kids said you'd moved...and they didn't know where. I don't know," he paused. "This is all very confusing. His kids wouldn't even tell me your name. I think they left to try to find a lawyer and see if they could override the standard rules."

"That would be so like them. I don't understand what's happening. And I think it's so sad that he felt he had no other choices. Did his kids talk about any funeral service?"

"Apparently he left a suicide note and didn't want anything. I don't think they'll plan anything. They said he requested no recognition of any kind."

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#### **FACTS: History and Myths:**

Before the 1970s, people assumed that incest rarely happened. Through the efforts of the women's movement, it was revealed as a common occurrence. People "began to realize that incest happened much more often than anyone had thought and that it devastated children" (Davis 317). By the 1970s, statistics showed that an American woman stood 1 chance in 3 of being sexually abused before the age of eighteen - usually by a relative or friend of the family...At college age, the chances were 1 in 5" (Davis 308).

Many myths and misinformation has circulated within our society about incest, helping to perpetuate it. The website secasa identified these **MYTHS**:

- Children Lie About Incest
- Children Are Sexually Provocative
- Men Who Commit Incest Are Sick
- Men Can't Control Their Sexual Urges
- Rapists Are Sex-Crazed Madmen

- Incest Is Not Harmful
- Incest Only Takes Place In Dysfunctional Families  
(Notice any connection to the theories?)

Davis, in Moving the Mountain, notes that the primary reason the occurrence of incest persists is that “domestic violence is an ancient evil long tolerated by societies that treat women and children as property of their husbands and fathers”... [Males have historically been seen as] “helpless to resist their own sexual urges... [and there has] long been a tendency to blame the victim” (309).

Some of those who have been victimized have begun to report their stories. Some very traumatized [by incest] have “developed multiple personalities or found other ways to dissociate from the experience” (Davis 317).

The secasa website identifies these very important **TRUTHS** about incest:

- Research findings and the experiences of those who work with sexually abused children have shown that children very rarely lie about incest.
  - Statistics show that in 98% of cases children's statements are found to be true (Dympna, ncvc).
- Children are often very reluctant to disclose what is happening to them, making detection difficult.
- Some men choose to abuse children's displays of affection by turning them into an excuse for sexual assault.
- Incest is actively initiated by the offender. It is accompanied by the use of force, bribery, or coercion, as well as the child's ignorance and confusion about what is happening.

- Incest occurs in families of every description and across all socio-economic groupings. Research indicates that there is little to distinguish between families where incest takes place and those where it doesn't (ncvc).
- The "average" offender is likely to appear "normal," a married man with a family and a job. He is often well respected in the community and otherwise unidentifiable as an offender.

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### **FICTION STORY, continued:**

A short time later Sharon was surprised by the arrival of her sister, who'd been contacted and had driven several hours to be with her.

"The police called me," she said, "and wanted to know how to find you. I told them I didn't know. I found them a number for the oldest daughter, then told them I'd call her myself. I felt this was too tragic to have just a police call. His daughter told me she has no plans to speak to you because of you marrying her dad when you supposedly knew of the incest. What incest? What more about the incest?"

"You know I didn't know anything..." Sharon said ...until his counselor told me in February.

"I know....I told her that. She didn't seem to care. Said you have a bunch of things she wants....and she would get them. It sounds like she's going to go after you. Do you know of some new will he might have drawn up? "

"No, I don't. I only know some of the suicide note from the funeral home man. "

Later, Sharon's daughter drove into the driveway and rushed into the house.

"Mom! This is awful!" she said, hugging her mother.

"They don't want us to have anything to do with the burial," she said, crying again. "They want to treat us like we don't exist."

"You know, they've always been weird to us," said the daughter. "What else would you have expected from them? I'm sorry for all of this."

They sat down together on the couch. With the comfort of her daughter's hand, she thought back over the years of emotional abuse with her husband and her last year, living in fear of his anger - his final cruel, bitter words when he told her there was nothing in their marriage to save, that he was leaving and that she should find a divorce lawyer. The years had been difficult and she realized she would never have had a way of knowing why unless someone had told her. At least she now knew some of it. All the family must have become bound in some confidential code of silence.

She squeezed her daughter's hand, relieved and happy that her daughter had not become another victim. The thought was horrible, then realized she really didn't know.

She would have to ask at some point, but not now. She had too much to deal with to take on more. And her daughter as yet knew nothing about the incest.

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#### **FACTS: Treatment and Programs:**

The questions often asked are, "if a mother knows, why does she stay?" and "why doesn't she do something?" In most cases "women refuse to press charges" (Davis 319). The reasons are: financial impossibility, outright fear, marital obligations and expectations, hope of change, denial, forced isolation, fear of rejection and judgment from family and friends...and finally, the stigma our society places on incest victims as well as offenders. Mothers find themselves without options, with nowhere to go and no way to survive. The children find themselves with even fewer options.

In the 1980s, an underground railroad sprang up to hide women and children.... Hundreds found refuge in secret...in private homes or shelters (Davis 318). These secret shelters now exist in almost all cities and communities in the United States. They actively and daily receive and protect victims.

A nationwide network, "To Tell the Truth," was started in 1992 by adult incest survivors as a place in which survivors can be heard and can heal. "Beginning in 1999,



the Incest Awareness Foundation started 'To Tell The Truth Conferences' for the greater New York area. ...There is no magic cure for sexual abuse or incest" (rainn).

Through the efforts of women's groups, programs are now available. Resources for incest victims include books, self-help groups, workshops, short and long-term therapy programs, and possible legal remedies. Many survivors of incest have formed [their own] self-help/support groups where they, along with other incest survivors, can discuss their victimization and find role models who have survived incest" (Vanderbilt, ncvc). Many find assistance to obtain jobs and, consequently, the ability to break away and live independently.

Awareness is the key. For families to be more aware, it is important that information about offenders be available to help families identify incest and to make known what options are available. Offenders are often only identified when their victims gain the ability "to tell." "There is nothing which would enable anyone, including the most clever experts, to distinguish a person who has had sexual contact with a child from anyone else... They become very clever at hiding their deviant impulses" (Glasser, secasa).

The single most significant thing to do to prevent sexual assault of children is to take incest out of its closet – to directly tackle this 'secrecy' with sharing the knowledge of its existence with children and young people. Only knowledge can break down the taboo of silence, provide knowledge, the most powerful weapon, and give children the ability talk about it. Children will be strengthened by the knowledge and skills when they

learn to recognize their “right to be safe.” It is important to provide them with information about their bodies, sex and sexual assault to develop an increasing awareness and cognitive understanding of appropriate and inappropriate touching and sexual behavior. It is important to realize that incest may not always be accompanied by danger, threat or violence. It may occur as a subtle process rather than a discreet event, and it may take place over a number of years, hidden within the dynamics of the father-daughter/child relationship - someone the child trusts and depends upon (secasa).

Survivors develop a full range of coping behaviors, often maintained at a subconscious level due to repression. Some have already been identified earlier, but a more complete list includes:

- Depression
- self-blame
- guilt
- sense of betrayal
- sexual problems
- self-destructive behaviors
- suicide
- re-victimization.
- distortions of cognitive processes leading in adulthood to
  - emotional distortions
  - mood disturbances
  - low self-esteem

The effects and behaviors related to incest vary widely and the diagnostic criteria may not be seen in all survivors. Because sexual abuse falls outside the range of normal childhood experiences, what results after incest is often a “shock state,” Only with the

help of supportive and understanding adults can a victim try to resolve the trauma (secasa). Treatment is often ongoing and often lifelong.

There are many reasons why children do not receive the support and help they need to recover from sexual abuse. First, it is highly likely that the abuse is kept a secret... [Also] children often only realize in retrospect that they have in fact been abused. This awareness develops in light of developing increased awareness and cognitive understanding of appropriate and inappropriate touching and sexual behavior.

The emotional effects are deep-seated and hard to resolve.

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#### **FICTION STORY, continued:**

Sharon will never know his story. She was prevented by his adult-children any access to information regarding the circumstances of his death. His adult-children represented themselves as “executor of the will” and obtained all the items held by the police – the police report, his suicide letter, the list of items with him at the time of his death. They refused to allow her to see anything.

By the time she’d contacted the police, they were only able to help her find the name of the funeral home. She saw the will much later, when their lawyer sent it to her lawyer. He’d asked her to come in to his office. She found it had been made five months after he’d left her. The contents of the will were generalized and ambiguous. She asked her lawyer if it was legal.

“Yes,” he replied. “But I think I can override some of the will because you are the surviving spouse. I should be able to at least help you keep your house.”

“God, I hope so,” she said, unable to comprehend how she would ever be able to move, or even pack to move.

Less than a week later, the oldest daughter attempted to evict Sharon, claimed rights to the house and began a two-year assault on Sharon's already-fragile life. Sharon could only assume that it was perhaps the daughter's way to get a final retribution - revenge. The daughter proceeded to claim as her father's everything that had been part of the marriage. Sharon began to feel that the daughter wished to put her "on trial" for her father's death - or for her having married him - or for his acts of incest. It was obvious that the daughter didn't care that she had not known of his incest before their marriage.

Two harrowing years ensued, in spite of the adult-children, all in their thirties, knowing of her medical problems. They tried to strip her of everything through extended court proceedings. They committed 'breaking and entering - theft, which they claimed to be within their legal bounds and state statutes, presented extensive lists of fictitious items that she was to account for or pay compensation, and made accusations that prompted police involvement. All were claimed to be "within legal bounds" by their lawyer. All their actions were ignored or overlooked by the presiding judge.

Sharon called what she experienced "judicial rape." Spearheaded by the incested daughter, herself a competent lawyer who knew how to subtly influence the direction of the court, information was selectively admitted to the court proceedings. Sharon watched as the court became part of "the conspiracy of silence." Nothing was entered about her husband's incest or anger behavior, the fact that he had no relationship with his children and that they were the ones who had made that decision. Not a word was brought up of his past.

She was told by the judge not to repeat anything her husband had ever said, because he wasn't there to defend himself. She was warned by her own lawyer, concerned about the atmosphere in the court, to not tell any incest information or medical information because it might bias the judge against her. She was acutely aware that any mention of the past would anger the daughter and perhaps increase the intensity of the attack. Nothing was said.

The court, with half the picture, or actually no picture at all, reduced the marriage down to merely money and possessions. Excluded was information needed to show the financial history of the house and other items. In the end, based on the selectively

produced material, the judge decided to interpret the will in such a way as to allow the home to go to the adult-children - as well as all structures added to the property and most of the money in bank accounts. In spite of being the "surviving spouse," she was stripped of these rights and privileges...perhaps because he had left her - perhaps because he had told her to initiate divorce - perhaps because the divorce had been in progress - perhaps because the new will superceded all other legal rights - perhaps because of the biased information presented - perhaps because of the silence.

She was allotted her furnishings within the house and she was given the things she had brought into the marriage. In the courtroom, she listened to the final decisions of the judge, and a lecture that she was somehow not respectable, not believable.

Immediately they declared they were going to charge her an impossible amount of month's rent if she stayed in the house. Sharon had to quickly find a new place for herself and her daughter to live. With the help of friends, she managed to get out. With the help of time, she, a secondary victim of incest, hopes to heal and remake her life.

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#### **FACTS: Legal Ramifications:**

The legal system is still plagued by biases related to incest. Initially "wives often found that authorities weren't willing to believe her, especially if the man was middle or upper class" (Davis 318). Also, it has been common knowledge that "some judges try to punish the woman for supposedly vindictive behavior... if she brought charges, and the case went to court. In the late 1980s, courts still refused to believe mothers (Davis 318).

Incest carries with it a retinue of actions: deceit, silence, rejection, manipulation, indifference, demands, blackmail, vengeance, hate, distrust, anger, revenge, death, suicide - one form of destruction upon another. The "conspiracy of silence" with which it is treated contributes to its perpetuation. Social stigmatization contributes to the "conspiracy of silence." "Stigmatization focuses on the negative messages (badness, worthlessness, shamefulness and guilt) operating within the abuse experience or received

later, especially during disclosure, when moral judgments about the deviancy of the experiences is communicated by others, e.g., the mother, family members, relatives and professionals” (secasa).

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**FICTION STORY, continued:**

Sharon, many times over, was the victim of the emotional consequences of incest, whose insidious anger can linger throughout the lifetime of victims. In spite of her innocence of its existence and unknowingly marrying into a crippled family, she suffered the consequences on incest, a victim first of the “conspiracy of silence,” then of rejection, manipulation and the pain of conditional relationships, and finally of outright anger and revenge – so powerful it ultimately extended itself even into the supposed “sanctity” of the court.

The ripple effect of incest is beyond comprehension.

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**FACTS: How to recognize victims:**

Incest has far-reaching effects. The most tragic is that when people are afraid to expose it, afraid to hear about it, afraid to have it touch their lives, it will continue to happen - hidden from the eyes of others. Incest is perpetuated by the cultural structure of our patriarchal society, the father with unquestioned control and legal benefits. Ongoing social change must occur to redefine the power structure within the family.

We need to search for ways to prevent future generations from having to endure such abuse and for ways to prevent continuation of the cycle of abuse within the family and family relationships. Because children are afraid to tell, due to fear or threats or coercion, adults, family and friends must learn to recognize signs of abuse. Physical

evidence is rare, for the repeat-offender takes precautions to protect against discovery.

Behavior changes in the child often occur and can be used as signs. However, there are no set behaviors that show definitively that a child has been or is being sexually abused.

In addition, behaviors will differ for each child and each case.

Additional symptoms seen in children and teens:

- Eating Disorders
- Sleep disturbances
- Nightmares
- Physical complaints
- School problems
- Withdrawal from family, friends, or usual activities
- Excessive bathing or poor hygiene
- Anxiety
- Running away
- Passive or overly pleasing behavior
- Low self-esteem
- Hostility or aggression
- Drug or alcohol problems
- Sexual activity or pregnancy at an early age; promiscuity

Seen in children who have been exposed to more frequent and more severe sexual abuse:

- Copying adult sexual behavior
- Sexual play with other children, themselves, toys or pets
- Displaying sexual knowledge, through language or behavior, that is beyond that considered normal for their age
- Unexplained pain, swelling, bleeding or irritation of the mouth, genital or anal areas
- Existence of unusual urinary infections or sexually transmitted diseases (coolnurse)

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## **CONCLUSION:**

Incest should be and must be brought out of the closet and addressed as a crime, with the punishment and rehabilitation programs visible to the public eye. Additionally we must seek healthy, humane ways in which to move forward.

Whether this daughter felt she had won or not, she certainly continued its destructive cycle, pushing the poison of incest even more deeply into the hearts and homes of families and of friend's – to appease her own. The fingers of the father's death, of the fingers of the court responding to his newly-drawn-up will, and of the persistence of his vengeful, victimized daughter, put a strangle hold on many more victims - especially the judge and those that assisted the daughter in distorting the case to her benefit, her lawyers and the executor-of-the-will

This story is important to tell because it has occurred since 2000 and because it needs telling - so we are all aware of what we still face. I hope all are willing to help improve the status and safety of women and children. I hope this project will help all readers so that you will educate yourselves, know your options and know how to pursue your legal rights. The current resolution and treatment of incest continues into the twenty-first century to be unpredictable and shrouded in secrecies and biases. We must work for change.



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