**Cheating On The Kids**

*When children are aware of a parent’s philandering, adultery moves into another league altogether. The impact can be devastating – and may linger for years.*

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‘I always had a feeling. My Dad was never home. He was always supposed to be working. Even Saturday nights. What was he doing working Saturday nights? I used to wonder what was going on, but you don’t want to believe that, do you? Not about your own father.” Now in her early 40s, Marcia\* is a lively, slim blonde woman, comfortably settled with her lawyer husband and three children in their stylish home in Cremorne on Sydney’s North Shore. It was only a few years ago that she found definite proof that her father was having an affair. Her brother, John, was on his way to a movie theatre in a suburb far from his usual neighbourhood. When he stopped at traffic lights, there in the car next to him was his father – with another woman. “My brother was devastated,” says Marcia. “He went into some toilets and started puking. We’re talking about a 35-year-old man – he just couldn’t cope.”

Marcia and her siblings now know the identity of the white-haired woman who, for the past 40 years, has been their father’s mistress. “She’s short and roundish, just like my mother,” says Marcia. She lives in red-brick suburbia, in a house owned by Marcia’s father, while her mother remains in the elegant North Shore marital home. At one stage, Marcia and her siblings approached a detective to find out more – but he warned them their mother may not wish to be confronted with such evidence. He was right. It turns out their mother has known all along, from the time the affair started a year after she married. Marcia describes her mother’s attitude as, “I’m-determined-not-to-let-her-have-him.” So, the marriage limps on, with Marcia’s 73-year-old father still spending three nights a week in his other home.

Marcia’s story – of the dozens of examples of parental infidelity I researched for this article – proved unusual, not only for the enduring nature of her father’s affair, but for the fact she emerged relatively unscathed. Yes, she suffered low self-esteem in her 20s, but she attributes this to growing up in a home where her bad-tempered father regarded his children as allies of the wife he despised. The affair mattered little in comparison.

Contrast this with the powerful image of John, a grown man, vomiting with distress at seeing his father’s mistress. Like most men, he didn’t want to talk about it. But his violent reaction was proof of his feelings. The gruff Italian father would, most likely, have been surprised by his son’s response. It is rare that we consider the impact of sexual betrayal on the children of the family. Most adults, caught up in the excitement of their illicit behaviour, never contemplate the trickle-down effect of their actions on the next generation.

“If I had a plea from the heart, it would be for people, for all those parents who think they are acting in isolation, to realise they are not. When parents have affairs, it does affect others and the impact on the children can be profound,” says Clare, 44, a confident, divorced Sydney journalist, who grew up in two broken homes as a result of her father’s infidelities. “I can’t begin to put into words what it feels like to have that sense of betrayal. How can a child feel secure when the basis of the family is built on deceit.”

Sharon, a Melbourne car rental clerk, says, “I felt my whole life had been one big lie.” Now in her early 20s, Sharon is still upset by the discovery four years ago that her mother had lied about her relationship with a business associate – an affair that lasted for six years. “I was devastated. I realised I’d been used as a cover-up. I’d been lied to so much.”

It’s so personal, the affront these grown children feel. Listen to Patricia – a sophisticated mid-30s Sydney art director – talking about her reaction to her father’s affair:

“I felt personally betrayed. It was not that he was betraying my mother. I wasn’t considering my mother’s hurt at the time, being so young. I felt he was doing these things to me. He’d upset our family.”

Many would be surprised to hear these grown children talk with such ferocious emotion about the discovery of their parent’s infidelity.marriage, or nervous of risking further hurt to an already wounded parent. Only within intimate family circles is the truth about mum and dad’s marriage likely to be discussed. Even then, open conversations are rare. Sisters talk to sisters, sometimes mothers to daughters. But in many families, a conspiracy of silence surrounds this painful topic.

Natalie’s confident professional image – she’s a Brisbane investment banker, in her early 40s, attractive and well-groomed – belies the emotional turmoil that characterises her private life. In her view, at the heart of many of her problems is the legacy of her father’s affair. For years she has stewed over this blight on her adolescence,

bitterly resenting the fact she was drawn into the family secret. She’d always assumed her parents had a happy marriage. Then came the day – she was 10 or 11 – when she and her father stood chatting to the next-door neighbour, a woman Natalie regarded as a dear friend (“I was far closer to her than my mother.”). She suddenly realised her father was signalling to the woman over her head, and it occurred to her that they had an illicit relationship.

From then on she was caught up in their secret alliance. Her father would sometimes come into her room at night, ostensibly to talk to her, but Natalie knew he was hovering near her window to gain a direct line of communication into the neighbour’s kitchen.

Eventually she learned her mother knew about the affair, but she was still caught in the middle. “I felt awful. For years my parents didn’t speak to each other. I felt constantly as if I was trying to keep everyone happy. I always felt responsible in some way.”

This is the universal child’s reaction to parents in trouble – they blame themselves, wonder what they did wrong. Having shared her father’s secret, Natalie was dragged into the deceit. And, inevitably, this alliance with her father created barriers that added to an already troubled relationship with her mother. “I had never been close to her. She was shy, quite retiring. I felt sorry for her, but I felt angry with her, too, that she couldn’t keep him.” Natalie’s parents were astonished when she recently told them how much her father’s affair had affected her. (Yes, they are still together and now, surprisingly, very much in love.) “It profoundly affected me in every way. I think that’s the reason I’m not married,” she said, explaining she didn’t know how to conduct an honest relationship. For a long time she took care that she was never deceived by a man. “I made sure I was as bad as he was. It was a weapon.”

Natalie was the one, of all the children, most like her father. In light of her father’s behaviour, that likeness came to haunt her: “If I was so like my father, what does that make me?”

It’s not like inheriting your father’s nose or your mother’s temper. Children of unfaithful parents often find themselves pondering difficult questions about their parents’ behaviour, whom they take after, how they will handle this issue in their own lives. Whichever course they take, the chances are their parents’ behaviour will continue to have an impact on their lives.

Amid all this talk about infidelity, it pays to remember that not everyone sees the issue in these terms. Back in the ’70s, when I was working as a sex therapist, I met many couples who were experimenting with open marriages that threw out normal taboos regarding extramarital sex. Here we were not talking about betrayal and deceit – the affairs were open, by mutual consent. Some of these marriages came toa sticky end and it was sometimes interesting to see how the children of such couples fared.

“We didn’t like it at all. I used to tell Dad that his behaviour made me sick. I hated it and saw him as 100 per cent responsible. I saw Mum as unwilling and, because of that, I could forgive her,” says Jean, 31, a recently married social worker living in a small Victorian town. Jean’s parents were actively involved in the swinging scene throughout her childhood. Her Mum and Dad were part of a group of couples who took turns at swapping partners for frolicsome weekends away on a houseboat. Occasionally her parents would also bring sexual partners to the family home. That’s how the 10-year-old Jean first was exposed to her parents’ activities.

“I was nine or 10 and Dad had someone stay over. I walked in and found the two of them in bed together. Dad hadn’t closed the door. I was really shocked, really indignant on Mum’s behalf, but Dad was quite unfazed. He said, as far as Mum was concerned, it wasn’t a problem.” Then the truth dawned. Jean started to realise what was happening on the houseboat. “I was really shocked and appalled.” She distanced herself from what was going on. Conversations with Jean’s mother reveal she was hardly an unwilling participant at the time. Yes, it was certainly her husband’s idea to get involved in the swinging scene, but she was active and enthusiastic. She, too, brought partners back to the house, but more discreetly than her husband. Yet her children always chose to see their father as the villain, their mother, the reluctant conscript.

It wasn’t until a few years ago, in therapy, that Jean was able to cope with the idea her mother may have enjoyed it. Looking back, she feels she constructed the image of her mother as victim to cope with what was going on. “It gave me one stable parent,” she says.

Jean knew her mother tried to protect her from the impact of their behaviour. On one occasion when Jean was about 13, one of the men involved with their swinging scene made a pass at her. “I remember Mum saying, ‘This has got to stop. It can’t continue if it’s involving the children in this way’.” Her father showed no such awareness of the risks of imposing adult sexual behaviour on children. As young children, both Jean and her sister were involved in sexual touching with their father as part of what he regarded as sex education. Jean remembers being told her father wanted to take her out on her 13th birthday, a special father-daughter celebration. “Somehow I got it into my head that I would have to sleep with my father. I remember awaking on my birthday and thinking, ‘Right, I’ve got to go into combat’.” Luckily, she had it wrong – but her story highlights the emotional vulnerability of children in such a sexualised family.

In recent times, Jean’s family situation is complicated by the fact that while her 60-year-old mother has retired from extramarital activities, her father has

settled into an ongoing affair – which initially was conducted without his wife’s knowledge. This broke the rules of their open marriage and her mother’s subsequent unhappiness has greatly increased her children’s resentment of their father.

Jean’s brother Andrew – a 30-year-old marketing executive – says that although he was vaguely aware of what was going on when he was growing up, he didn’t have strong feelings about it. Like many males, he chose not to think too much about what was happening in his family relations. It was striking how often I encountered this reaction. When I asked women about their brother’s response to parental affairs, the typical answer was: “He didn’t want to know.” It’s a perfect example of stonewalling – men’s ability to build emotional barriers to protect themselves from hurt.

“Every time it came into my mind – where Dad might be, who he might be with – I used to blank it out. I tried not to think about it,” said another of Marcia’s brothers, Franco.

In Andrew’s case, it is his father’s current relationship that raises his hackles. “I don’t like it. I don’t approve of it. I wish it wasn’t going on.” His reaction has been to withdraw from an already strained relationship with his distant father. And to be careful not to follow in his sexually liberated footsteps. “I sleep in the nude but I want to ensure I don’t cause any negative feelings in my kids. I don’t want them uncomfortable with me,” says Andrew, who intends to cover up when the kids are old enough to notice. Both he and his sister recall being afraid of bringing children home for fear of encountering their parents’ nudity or even more alarming habits. These children grew up knowing their parents were breaking what, even in the swinging ’70s, was still a strong cultural taboo. Their parents’ behaviour set them apart from their peers, and their consequent feelings of discomfort have led to their current conservative attitudes.

It’s a different matter when there is cultural support for extramarital relations, as was the case with several families with European backgrounds with whom I spoke. Clare’s Greek father saw his dalliances as simply his just reward: “He had the expectation that as long as you provided well, men could pretty well do what they wanted and it was no-one else’s business.”

Patricia, red-haired, mid-30s mother of three, grew up with a similar macho European father. Her husband is a very different breed. He’s a doctor, kind and gentle. “He catches insects in the house and lets them go outside. My father used to stomp on them,” she tells me with a chuckle. Yet for the first six years of her marriage, Patricia would wake up in a cold sweat, having dreamt her husband had run off with someone else. “He’d wake up beside me and say, ‘Who was it this time? Did I have a good time?’

For women like Patricia, their daddies were the loves of their lives. Philandering men tend to be extremely personable and persuasive – and they often practise that charm on their daughters. Again and again I’d hear how good-looking these fathers were. “The spitting image of Clark Gable,” says Patricia. Marcia: “Oh yes, when he was younger he was very good looking in that greasy, Italian sort of way.”

Adolescence is the time when most of us start to recover from the idealisation of our parents that is intrinsic to the security of childhood. The discovery of cracks in parental perfection is often a painful process – particularly when the adolescent girl discovers the charming father she adores has been betraying her mother. Just at the time she’s discovering her own sexuality, she’s forced to confront her father as a sexual being, a man behaving sexually in a treacherous manner.

When you hear Patricia’s stories of her lecherous father, it is hardly surprising she took years to recover. “He’d do dreadful things like not turn up on Christmas Eve. We’d be all there waiting for him and he wouldn’t come home for three days.” She’s now forgiven the old man. “I love my father dearly. In his old age, he’s the most wonderful father and grandfather. Men, when they lose their libido, become almost human,” she says cheerfully.

Talking to women betrayed by their fathers, it is interesting to note how often they direct their hurt toward their mothers. Natalie reacts with anger that her mother was unable to keep her adored father at home, where he belonged. Patricia talks with resentment about the way her mother handled the philandering. “I hated the way my mother behaved. She was so weak. She wept and wailed until the rest of us said, ‘Oh, please! Stop!’ ” Worse, she chose Patricia as her confidante, revealing to her all sorts of intimate details regarding her marriage. “She’s been a great one for telling me all the nitty-gritty of their sex life. When I was 13, she said, ‘Your father’s abnormal. He likes sex in the mouth.’ I was just horrified. The more she told me, the less I wanted to know.”

Much as she despised her father’s behaviour, she now resents her mother’s attempts to turn her against him. “I remember wanting something and my mother saying I couldn’t have it because my father had just spent all this money on one of his mistresses.” It’s not uncommon for mothers to enlist the support of their children in an alliance against the philandering father, but this strategy frequently backfires when children grow up and gain a better understanding of the complex issues involved in their

parents’ marriage.

And if the mother has the affair, what then? Well, it proved more difficult to find people willing to talk about their mother’s infidelity – in part because mothers of past generations were lesssexually active, but perhaps also because this is an even more touchy subject. The woman who rejects the role of perfect wife and mother to indulge her own sexual fantasies breaks even stronger cultural mores. One of my most distressing conversations was with Sharon, the young Melbourne woman whose mother deceived her by having a relationship with a business associate. Sharon’s close relationship with her mother was destroyed by the revelation of the affair. The consequent marriage break-up, horrendous arguments and violence left the children bitter and bruised.

“She was such a big part of my life and now she still wants me to think of her with the same respect. My mother still doesn’t believe she has hurt me at all. I think, ‘Christ, my whole life has been hurt by you.’ I would never put anyone through what I have been through,certainly not my own children.”

It is clear that the betrayal of infidelity is not just to the long-suffering spouse. And even if marriages survive affairs, parents take risks revealing the secrets of their past relationships to their children. Many of us create an idealised image of our parents’ marriage – an image that helps to mould our own ideas about relationships and family life. We tend to cling to our illusions and may bitterly resent being forced to confront the truth. But there are some adults who react to news of parental affairs with intrigue or curiosity – all manner of far more positive emotions. “I was pleased for her,” one woman told me, describing her reaction when she learnt her mother once had an affair.

The conversation between the two women took place when the daughter was an adult, and left the younger woman quite unfazed. “I had always felt that deep down my mother was a very passionate woman and I was rather sad for her that she was married to my father. I love him dearly but I don’t think he was ever very interested in sex. So

I was glad that my mother didn’t totally miss out on that part of life.”

The motivations of the parent in telling the child are also relevant. Leslie is a fresh-faced university graduate. As a teenager struggling to gain approval for her relationship with a considerably older boy, her father told her he, too, had a forbidden relationship – he was having an affair. “Initially I thought, ‘Wow, this is an opportunity for me to get a bit of acceptance in exchange for acknowledging what he was doing, so I said, ‘That’s okay.’ ”

It was only later she resented her father’s action. “It was incredibly unfair of him to impose that knowledge on me. I talk to my mother and think, ‘You poor fool.’ I could tell her, but it’s such a gigantic issue and you don’t know what the implications will be.”

Clearly there are any number of factors likely to affect the way children react to parental infidelity – the age they find out, the relationship with both parents, personality factors, the stability of the family. Some marriages break down due to infidelity, others survive it, and, obviously, the effect on the children is very different.

Alan was another victim of parental infidelity. His father’s affair led to the break-up of his parents’ marriage and seven years spent in a troubled home where both his stepmother and father were cheating. For a while, Alan followed in his father’s footsteps. “It was a challenge to me to get ladies into bed. It was a game to me. The next morning you’d wake up, stretch, and walk out the door,” he tells me sheepishly.

It was a personal development course that changed Alan’s attitude: “It involved meditation and stuff like that. I had a good cry. It made me feel a hell of a lot better.” The result was he saw his father differently. “I realised he wasn’t such a great guy after all. That hurt me a fair bit. You know you sort of worship your father but I realised his way of life isn’t so great. It’s more important to have love and security.” Alan, now married with a young child, is in the throes of giving up his carpentry career to work as an alternative therapist.

Yet it was interesting to discover how many other males saw themselves as relatively unaffected by parental infidelity, while women tend to take the issue far more seriously. John, the man who threw up after seeing his father with another woman, says: “I could blame my father for a lot of things. I could say I played around because of my father. He was never there when I was growing up, so I did this or that. To me, that’s just a cop-out. Dad had no bearing on what I did. It’s in me to get things the way they should be.” Contrast this with Sydney book editor, Esther, 40 and single, who feels her father’s affairs ultimately led to her depression, social isolation and years of being grossly overweight. “It had a lot to do with hiding myself from a world where men and women play these sort of games,” she says. It’s left her with a tainted view of men: “They should keep their flies zipped up!”

Up to now, daddies have tended to be the bad guys. But as more mothers stray from the straight and narrow, the complexities will increase. It will pay to remember that in the years to come, when our children lie on therapists’ couches, paying big bucks to exhume psychological damage inflicted on them by their parents, dalliances are bound to feature strongly.