

Reclaiming Our Narrative: A Hybridized Memoir and Analysis  
Challenging the Tropes of Familial Narcissistic Abuse in Literature and Reality

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## **Introduction**

The goal of this project is to illustrate the way that the tropes in literary texts about narcissistic families perpetuate the acceptance of narcissistic parenting behaviors, for various reasons, and the traumatic effects on their children. To combat this, we need more literary texts, fiction and nonfiction, that challenge that damaging narrative; instead, narratives that argue for accountability of narcissists in families, raise awareness of the traumatic effects on those raised by narcissists and offer new narratives of agency and healing for the writers and their audiences. This method would validate emotional and psychological trauma and gives children of narcissists permission to do what is best for them, instead of feeling obligated to forgive and return to the environments which harmed them in the first place. In this hybrid project of literary analysis and memoir, I juxtapose the forgiving, patient, or guilt-ridden treatment of narcissistic parents in literary texts, fiction and nonfiction, and their many abusive characteristics with sections of my memoir in which I compare the very same traits of my narcissistic parents and the importance of accountability for my own healing from trauma. My purpose is to raise awareness about the type of abuse narcissistic parents engage in, corroborate the experiences of children of narcissists, and propose the option for writers of fiction and memoir to hold their parents accountable in their writing, and thereby provide a model of healing for victims through writing; readers can trust the narrators and move in a direction that brings them closer to healing.

But what is narcissism? All the symptoms are basically the same, anywhere you look.

A grandiose sense of self-importance. A preoccupation, or obsession, with however others define success: beauty, money, intelligence. A belief that they are “special” and better than everyone else, and a need for others to recognize that “fact.” Narcissists require constant admiration, and have breakdowns if they don’t get it. They’re entitled, and they take advantage

of people. They lack empathy. They have no interest in the lives of other people. They're regularly arrogant and haughty toward others. They need to be the center of attention, the center of your world. They believe others are jealous of them. They lie, and lie about lying. They manipulate, and lie about that, too (Mayo Clinic Staff).

These traits are present in my parents, glaringly obvious. They are also present in the parents of memoir and fiction writing, though they are not named as narcissists by authors, their actions are not scrutinized, the protagonist doesn't get closure, and they seem to get a free pass to continue their bad behavior. In literature, we see many examples of narcissistic characters, in particular, as authors explore parent-child relationships.

In *Sharp Objects* by Gillian Flynn, the reader follows amateur reporter Camille, who returns to her hometown to cover the deaths of two little girls. Upon arrival, she is faced by her abusive family and the horrible discoveries about her family's involvement with the current crimes, as well as the death of her sister at the hands of her mother, Adora, who has Munchausen-by-Proxy Syndrome. Camille struggles with alcoholism, habits of self-harm, and a chronic distrust of others, all because, we learn, of the neglect and emotional abuse she has faced at the hands of her narcissistic mother. Mary Karr, author of *The Liar's Club*, chronicles her childhood and then, briefly, her young adulthood in a turbulent, sometimes violent, and always emotionally neglectful and psychologically abusive family with two parents who each display narcissistic traits, in their own unique ways. Delphine de Vigan, the author of a memoir, *Nothing Holds Back the Night*, which she claims is fiction, pieces together the tragic childhood of her mother and how it impacted her ascent into a madness-filled, chaotic adulthood, and, subsequently, was one, if not the only, contributing factor in Delphine and her sister's abuse. *What My Mother and I Don't Talk About* features essays from numerous memoirists who talk

about, yes, what they and their mothers don't talk about. In many of these memoirs, many of the children (now adults as they write) face drastically different situations with parents who are shockingly similar in their narcissistic style of parenting. What all these stories, memoirs, novels, essays, have in common, is that in each and every one, the author feels unable or unallowed to hold their parents accountable, to point to their parents actions on the page or in person and say: "This hurt me, it was wrong, and you should take responsibility for it." If children of narcissists cannot say these words to their parents, they can never move forward; they remain trapped in their trauma.

But this is what society teaches us: to honor thy father and thy mother, to respect your elders no matter what. In "The Debt: What Do Grown Children Owe Their Terrible, Abusive Parents?" writer Emily Yoffe, in an interview with Michael Martin on NPR, says that she often gets calls from children of abusive parents who feel "pressure [to] have closure, to forgive [...] because [they] would feel so guilty if [they] didn't have a reconciliation" (Martin, Michel, Emily Yoffe, and Richard Friedman). In response to this, she asserts that "sometimes, what people who are saying forgive don't recognize is, there can be a tremendous cost to the person who was abused to go back to the abuser and say, all is forgiven" (Martin, Michel, Emily Yoffe, and Richard Friedman). In fact, I argue that when fiction and nonfiction literary texts encourage children of narcissists to forgive their parents, they invalidate childrens' experiences and trauma (gaslighting, etc.), and put them in danger of even more abuse. The result of a narcissist never taking responsibility for their actions is that they *never change*. They continue to abuse, thinking they've done nothing wrong; especially if no one has held them accountable for their actions.

Narcissistic relationships cause long-lasting, harmful effects on the victim. Most often, narcissistic abuse takes the forms of emotional and psychological abuse according to Darlene

Lancer, a relationship and codependency expert with 30 years of experience (Lancer). When the narcissistic relationship is between a parent and a child, that harm is even more dramatic, damaging, and difficult to navigate in adulthood. In an article about her abusive mother and her experience with emotional abuse not being taken as seriously as physical abuse, Heather Ashman writes:

When you have been emotionally abused it can be hard to point to a large clear example. Many times, the abuse is the cumulative effect of years of daily small mistreatment. When we try to give people examples, they seem to think none of the things were a big deal. Perhaps on their own, each instance may not have been a big deal but when everything the abuser has done is taken as a whole; it was abuse.

What Ashman means is that stories of emotional abuse or psychological abuse at the hands of a narcissistic parent are generally downplayed or even disregarded, leading to this culture of inexhaustible forgiveness and patience for our parents because emotional abuse is invisible, and because they are our parents. Equally problematic, perhaps more, is when literature does the same thing. When the authors themselves, who write about their abuse because they feel wronged and compelled to make sense of their trauma, like we readers might, feel pressured by this culture of infinite forgiveness to shy away from resolution or closure.

Perhaps one of the reasons emotional and psychological abuse is often not believed is because victims of it generally have memory issues due to gaslighting (a tactic in which a person or entity, in order to gain more power, makes a victim question their reality (Sarkis) and trauma. Repressing or entirely forgetting a traumatic event is a common effect of Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. CPTSD, which “appear[s] frequently in people who’ve been abused by someone who was supposed to be their caregiver or protector” (Healthline). Children of

narcissistic parents obviously fit the bill. Reliving or re-experiencing memories as the result of a trigger are also a symptom of CPTSD, which seems to be the motivation behind many of these memoirs, and something explored in fiction as well about narcissistic families.

Memory is addressed broadly and repeatedly in these types of “dysfunctional family” stories; characters forget things, or suddenly remember them, or have physical, sometimes violent responses to a flash of something they can’t put their finger on. For example, the main character Camille from *Sharp Objects* is haunted by “jangle[s] of memory” (165) related to her mother’s abuse. For Mary Karr, her understanding of all her memories is that if “the truth would be unbearable the mind often just blanks it out” (9). Nayomi Munaweera, one of the essayists from *What My Mother and I Don’t Talk About*, in her memoir “Hey Body/My Body,” acknowledges that her “own memory is also spotty and broken” (201), and only redeemed by having a sister who can fill in the gaps of her traumatized memories of abuse and manipulation.

I have these very same experiences with my memory, which led me, for many years, to doubt myself, my perception of myself and my family, and whether I was right or wrong about what I believed to be abuse. Writing and reading memoir has opened a door for me to understand and validate my memories and therefore my emotional and psychological trauma, just like it promises to do for others regardless of whether they embrace that freedom or not. Memoir scholar and writer Patricia Hampl stresses that “no memoirist writes for long enough without an unsettling disbelief about the reliability of memory” (266). That is, all of us who write about our memories must grapple with our own “created version of the past [...] a version that attaches us to our limitations, to the inevitable subjectivity, of our points of view” (270). Memory is fallible because each of our minds creates its own version of truth, its own version of a profound and affecting experience— if we do not document our recollection of this thing, it may turn into

something else at the hands of another person. And sometimes, that can be dangerous. It can be dangerous politically, as Patricia Hampl states (270), and dangerous on a more personal scale as well. In light of these texts about narcissistic parenting and abuse, I assert that it is also particularly dangerous for children of narcissistic parents to forget those memories. We trust our parents inherently; we cannot imagine as children that they will do anything that is not in our best interest. But what if our parents are the type of people to manipulate reality, to gaslight us, to create in us a habit of distrusting our own memories and opinions, while simultaneously abusing us so thoroughly that our bodies repress these memories? In that case, as Hampl argues if we do not do the work of “creating this personal version of the past, someone else will do it for us” (270), and we may never be free from the influence of our abusers; we may continue to languish under their grip of our perception.

Mary Karr, whose advice on writing the family in *The Art of Memoir* perfectly encapsulates her problematic, unaddressed relationship with her abusive narcissistic mother, gives the memoirist many rules for how to write about family. However, some of them alienate a whole group of people whose families *do* deny the truth in order to save themselves from judgement, without any advice on how to navigate these rules should they not apply. One of these rules she lists is that “if somebody’s opinion of what happened wholly opposes mine, I mention it in passing without feeling obliged to represent it” (120). Other ill-informed rules include:

9. With your closest compadres and touchy material, you might sit with them [...] while they read pages that may be painful for them.
10. I’d cut anything that someone just flat-out denies. (121)

How should the memoirist who is trying to make sense of their painful memories amidst a family of unloving, neglectful, or violent members, follow these rules without being dishonest to their truth, or putting themselves in harm's way? The short answer: they cannot. And so, we must pursue our version of the truth (so long as it is as accurate as we can recall), the *emotional* truth, because that is how we heal through our writing, how we honor ourselves and our experience of trauma, and perhaps most importantly, how we hold our abusers accountable. However, many memoirists, clearly, still struggle with how to write about family and trauma under the pressure of societal expectations of putting family above all else, regardless of abuse or toxicity.

### **The Need to Remember – And Record**

RJ and I have a tradition: whenever I have an altercation with one of my parents, I recount the particularly horrible things they did or said to me, and he writes them down. If he was present, he also writes down whatever he remembers, if I have left it out. We do this so that if insidious self-doubt returns and I begin to blame myself for my lack of functional or supportive family, I can go back and remind myself of the reality. I need to do this because after my panic attack has ended, and I am finally laying down and my body is numb and my mind is blank, I can feel my brain working to repress the thing that got me so upset in the first place. The next day, I can hardly remember more than one or two things out of that hour-long argument built of gaslighting and guilt-tripping. It is important for things to be written down for me, so that my memories are not drowned out by the guilt and self-blame my parents taught me to subject myself to.

A month after I had stopped speaking to my mother, I had moved in with RJ and his gracious family. On Christmas, my mother sent me a brand-new wallet. My father got me a wallet I'd actually asked for. I gave the wallet from my mother to my fiancé's sister so that it



would get some use. When my father asked me one day, while I was at his house picking up some belongings, what I'd done with her gift, I told him the truth. I thought it was reasonable, actually, to let someone else have a wallet that I had no use for and did not want. What else would I do with it?

“You're not using it?”

“No, I have the one you gave me.”

“Your mother got you that wallet.”

“I know – but you got me the one I wanted, and I don't need *two* wallets.”

Then, as I saw his mouth contort and his eyes bulge, I backed away and shut the dog gate between us. I don't know why I did it – would flimsy metal bars and plastic latches keep him on the other side of the hallway? I think the image of the gate, the palpable barrier between us, the guard between he and I, was some kind of reassurance to my panicking mind. Of course, a dog gate only comes up to your hips, and so he reached over the gate, violently fast – or maybe I was experiencing time in slow-motion – closing his thick fingers around my thin wrist, pressing the pads of his fingers into the fleshy skin below the joint so that I felt the pressure moving my veins beneath the surface of the skin, pinching them, pushing those two knobby bones of the wrist together with the tightness of his fist.

The muscle-memory of kindergarten Kung Fu was still with me, apparently, because I twisted my arm out of his grasp and hissed at him.

“Don't touch me like that. I'm an adult. You can't touch me like that anymore.” I remember these words vividly, perhaps because I am proud of them. I vaguely, and possibly incorrectly, recall my father saying that yes, he could grab me like that, because he is my father.

Then, as if I had jumped forward in time, I was being ushered up the stairs and into his bedroom, the door shut and locked behind us. I stood in the middle of room, which somehow looked so jarringly different from how it had when I'd still lived there (he already had a new girlfriend moved in, only a year after my mother had moved to Mystic, and they were doing drastic renovations so that, at the time I'm writing this, my childhood house is something out of a Pottery Barn magazine and unrecognizable to me). What followed was an hour of screamed abuse, his bearded face so close to mine there was spittle on my cheeks and his rancid breath burned my nostrils. I held my ground throughout this round of "I Don't Know What You're Talking About,"<sup>1</sup> which is a game where my father and I shout in circles as I try to convince him of things they have done and how they have affected me, and he pretends that I am telling him all of this for the first time, feigning surprise and indignation, which sets me off into an equally indignant rage birthed from my need to be listened to, which is birthed from their inability to listen to me (when I was younger, my father used to sit in his recliner with the television remote in his hand and spontaneously go deaf as I stood next to his chair trying to talk to him or get his attention).

Yes, I fought back, until he began calling me unsentimental, careless, selfish, hypocritical, essentially a horrible daughter, and compared me to his brother, who, when he was in college some twenty-odd years ago, moved to Pennsylvania to get away from his family (they bully him relentlessly at every holiday, now; I remember my grandfather telling him, word-for-word, that my uncle was not funny and that he didn't like him). He told me that his brother abandoned them, and he wouldn't *let me* abandon them, too. He wouldn't *let me* turn into my uncle, whom they

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<sup>1</sup> Another *fun* round of this game was played when I tried to convince him of the time he had bellowed at me until I was in a sweating, sobbing ball on the floor, my lungs rattling with yet another panic attack, and then kept roaring at me because I needed to stop having panic attacks, I needed to "get used to reality, get used to the real world."

resent so much for his act of self-preservation. After this verbal abuse which, I admit, troubled me for weeks afterward as I questioned if he was right about me after all, I told him that his backwards and neglectful parenting was all the reason he needed to explain my behavior which he finds so repulsive.

“We did the best we could – there’s no *book on parenting*. Your grandfather used to get pretty rough with me, and we didn’t get along, but look where we are now.<sup>2</sup> You’ll see when you get older.”

“Actually,” I retorted, “there are books on parenting. Lots of books, by child psychologists.” Cue sputtering, and glaring at me. In moments like this, he looks clueless, hopeless, his receding hairline marking an M on the top of his head, his mouth open, jaw bouncing desperately.

“Well, most of those people don’t even have kids, so how would they know?”

I laughed at him.

“How do you know they don’t have kids? Where did you even get that? You’re just making wild assumptions to help your argument!” I said scornfully, and then I caught myself falling into the classic narcissistic tactic of arguing in circles for the sake of kicking up drama. “What are we even arguing about? Whether or not random authors of random parenting books have children?” More sputtering, and then some comment about how I was the one who brought it up. With that, I asked him if he was done because he seemed to be out of things to say, and he grunted at me like a wild boar and let me pass. I did so, cautiously.

Whatever confidence I had summoned in that moment left me as I exited the room – I realize now that it was a combination of my sharp and fleeting amusement at the absurdity of his

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<sup>2</sup> This is a [FLEA \(see page 12\)](#).

arguments, and a defense tactic to keep myself from breaking down – and suddenly I wanted to slump to the floor.

RJ had been sitting in my old room the entire time, listening to it all. He helped me outside – by now I was feeling like my bones had disappeared from my body or maybe dissolved, mixing in with the fluids – and I broke down in the car as we wrote down everything he could remember my father saying. Halfway through this, I couldn't keep it to myself any longer: I asked him why he hadn't swept into the room, told my father to can it, and rescued me. He looked at me regretfully, and then, resentfully.

“What was I supposed to do?” he asked softly, and I stared at him, realizing I didn't know.

“I don't know,” I said.

“My mom told me not to get into it with him, Mia. I'm sorry.” I looked down at my hands, and guilt radiated through my chest. How could I expect him to put himself in harm's way? Why would I *want* him to? I decided, I didn't.

And so, the best way he can help me is by assisting my memory, so that I can return to it when I am ready, so that I am not beholden to my father's version of events, so that I can remain cognizant of his actions and hold him responsible for them.

Months later, in yet another argument on the phone, my father claimed he had not grabbed me. RJ was with me, and his eyebrows raised as he laughed – *laughed* – and then looked derisively forward. Utter disgust.

“Yes, you did,” I said bluntly.

“Well, I don't remember that. If I did, it was only because you were walking away from me and being rude.”

“You can’t just grab people when they do things you don’t like. Grabbing someone like that is, by law, physical assault.”

RJ was looking at me now, and I felt it, too: pride.

### **FLEAs**

FLEA. It is an acronym, an accurate one at that. It stands for Frightening Lasting Effects of Abuse, and it also fits well into the old saying: if you lie down with dogs, you are bound to get fleas (Out of the Fog). Essentially, if you are in an environment with certain behaviors, you are bound to adopt those characteristics; you are bound to get *infected* (Out of the Fog). This is especially true within a narcissistic family dynamic: according to Christina Beck, as a child, we are taught to emulate our parents; children raised by narcissists will subconsciously imitate the very same abusive habits that their parents utilized when raising them because we are taught that this is the correct way to behave. Our parents give us fleas, and it takes a lot of hard work, introspection, and emotional distress to de-flea ourselves, especially if we continue to disregard or forgive their destructive habits, and therefore, our own; and if we never fix these problems, they can manifest in a milder form of narcissistic personality disorder. Sometimes, this is why our parents behave the way they do: they were given FLEAs, and never addressed them.

In *Sharp Objects*, not only does Camille struggle with FLEAs, wondering if she is good at “caring for Amma,” her younger sister, “because of kindness? Or did I like caring for Amma because I have Adora’s sickness?” (252) – that sickness being Munchausen by Proxy Syndrome – but she struggles with Amma herself. Adora, their mother, has a habit of cutting off friends or family at the slightest grievance or perceived slight: Adora’s best friend laments to Camille that “your momma isn’t talking to me right now – I disappointed her again somehow” (37). Later in the book, Amma is shown to have learned this harmful habit of the “glib discarding of friends”

(252) from her mother, adopting one of her mother's harmful behaviors because she has been exposed to it and therefore thinks it is an acceptable way of behaving. Camille and Amma have both been deeply affected by the FLEAs they got from their mother: in Camille's case, her constant second-guessing manifests in a lack of confidence and recurring self-harm. For Amma, the selfishness and manipulation she learned from Adora turns her into, literally, a 13-year old murderer.

In the memoir compilation *What My Mother and I Don't Talk About*, several of the authors tell their own stories of the FLEAs they have inherited from their parents. Bernice L. McFadden, a woman who was beat relentlessly by her drunkard father, and whose mother enabled this environment, behaves just as her father did in regard to her own child. When she discovers that her daughter has a boyfriend, she was "angry, of course" – of course? – "I asked if she was having sex and she vehemently denied it and then continued to defy me. I threatened expulsion from my house" (106). When she finally pushes her daughter to tears, McFadden admits to feeling "vindicated" (107), another alarming moment of maliciousness. This story quite literally embodies the collection's title, and ends there, without McFadden reflecting on her treatment of her own daughter or taking responsibility for her actions. The most enjoyable and triumphant essay from *What My Mother and I Don't Talk About* is from Carmen Machado, and even she has problematic moments when it comes to the FLEAs she inherited from her mother. She installs firm boundaries with her mother, holding her accountable for her behavior and treatment of Machado, and eventually goes no-contact with her family in order to live a healthier life. Still, though, she struggles with her FLEAs and sometimes lacks awareness about their negative affect on her. Her mother "needs to say something about everything, needs to fight." Machado claims that "it's something I've inherited from her, actually," and then goes on to say,

proudly, that “it’s one of my worst, and best, traits” (147). This trait is not her need to settle conflicts or be open about her emotions, it is her need to *create* conflict out of something that is most likely a miscommunication or an unintentional upset, rather than approach it maturely and calmly. Contrariwise, the other FLEA that she genuinely acknowledges is a fear of her adoption of her mother’s behaviors, rather than a point of pride like her need to argue. Machado says that this fear is that “I’ve learned less from my childhood than I should have, that I am more like her than I want to be” (153), a fear that most children of narcissists share with her: are we ourselves narcissists?

The good news is that, according to the growing community on Reddit, Raised by Narcissists, a majority of children who believe we might be narcissists are just struggling with our FLEAs. The community welcomes over 500,000 members, and features daily posts from those members about their own families, their fears, their needs for advice and recognition and validation. It also includes a side bar of resources for its members, with many articles written by certified psychologists and doctors. “Help! I think I am a narcissist!” addresses the anxiety of being a narcissist ourselves, and the alternative that we are simply disinfecting ourselves from the FLEAs our parents gave us. What this expansive and highly documented post on the community website asserts is that self-insight, empathy about the effects our actions have, and self-awareness are all characteristics that narcissists severely lack. Furthermore, from another website on FLEAs:

While it’s important to do the inner work necessary for healing, just keep in mind that these “fleas” are not indicative of your character. They are not symptoms of a full-fledged personality disorder with hardwired behavioral patterns. They are temporary and they can be addressed. (ThoughtCatalog)

This is the very reason why it is important for children of narcissists to hold their abusive parents accountable: if we do not acknowledge the harmful behaviors of our parents, then we may overlook them in ourselves or else misunderstand them. The result of this is stunted social, emotional, and personal growth and healing. With literature that challenges the acceptability of narcissistic abuse from parents and therefore the FLEAs we inherit from their upbringing, it will be easier for children of narcissists to see themselves in the written word and see a way out of their situation – and into their emotional journey.

### **Shedding My FLEAs**

I had a friend in high school who started drinking when we were in our sophomore year, before I met RJ. We'd been best friends, actually, ever since we'd met. We told each other we loved each other before bed, and texted one another first thing in the morning. At school we would spend every available moment together, and on the weekends, if we weren't together, we texted all day long. She felt like a drug, this thing I'd never had and was so desperate to hold close to my chest so no one would take her away from me.

She had long blonde hair and she was somewhat chubby, with a square face and full lips. Her bangs always got in her light green eyes, and she wore thick square glasses. Everything about her was square, actually, except her personality – she was sarcastic and kind of mean, in a teasing way, and she didn't take shit from anybody, and she always reassured me about how important I was to her. It felt good, after having no one but my rollercoaster of a mother for so long. I was her person, and she was mine, and it lasted for only a year and a half.

Then, she started to pull away from me. She started drinking, I heard from one of our mutual friends; she started bragging to me about how she was putting vodka in her coffee some mornings, and sometimes she would have to go vomit in the bathroom. My stomach grew



heavier with every day she didn't text me, or walked by me with a vague smile in the hallways, walking with some people I didn't know. Maybe it was a combination of the two.

I texted her when I was at my grandparents' house, during the school year, I remember this vividly. It looked just as it does now. The kitchen had glaringly white walls, a peninsula attached to the wall that separates the actual kitchen from the dining area. It's still the kitchen, though, we all call it that. There's an oval wooden table with matching rolling chairs. They're upholstered with this taupe material that feels like an old itchy carpet, and the arms are scratched-up, smudged gold with rectangular wooden armrests. The wheels don't roll properly on the tiled floor, they bump-bump-bump across the grout lines. I'm sitting in the chair closest to the peninsula, sandwiched between it and the table, my phone is plugged into the outlet and I'm texting feverishly. My thumbs are surely a blur. In this memory I am alone with my phone and the stranger on the other line, but I am sure my father and grandfather had to be there, sitting at the table with me. My grandmother was probably in the kitchen cooking for them as they shouted at her to hurry up.<sup>3</sup>

But this is my memory, and I am alone. I am texting her about how she's betrayed me, about how she's drinking and I'm uncomfortable with it, about how young we are and how much she's hurting me, about how she's hanging out with this bad crowd and I don't think I can come with her.

The thing is, I wasn't upset about the drinking: my father drank all the time, and we called him an alcoholic but he was actually generally happier and more affectionate when he

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<sup>3</sup> She has this habit of getting distracted by their conversations, and when she tries to pipe up, contribute something, she's always met with the same response: "Shut up, Angela, go back to what you were doing." The same from my father and my grandfather. Maybe she even hears some indignant demand about when the food will be done. I don't think I've ever heard my father call her *mom*.

drank; my mother also drank frequently (there was a party we had one summer, a *luau*, where I distinctly recall her wearing a purple (was it purple?), flowy, halter-top dress, with a bottle of rum clutched under her arm as she flitted between guests), and so did my grandparents. We're Italian, when we get together, we drink. What I was really upset about was that she was choosing someone else over me, these new friends who drank and broke the rules and probably smoked pot and were glamorously moody rather than destructively depressed, like I was. That wasn't okay. That was where I drew the line. If I wasn't her best friend, her most important friend, the person whom she texted *goodnight, I love you!* daily, then I would be nothing to her. That's what her decision illuminated for me: I was nothing to her, if I wasn't everything. I needed the validation of being the center of someone's universe, I needed the attention, just like my mother does, to this day. That was the day our friendship ended.

Many other high school friendships of mine ended this way – a minor slight or wrongdoing, or some kind of hint that things were about to get complicated for me, and I would confront them, blow it up to major proportions, and cut them off. To them, I'm sure, it was just further proof that I was an unstable, confused, maybe even psychotic individual, and they carried on with their lives even though I dwelled on it for months. It took me a very long time to figure out what was destroying my friendships, and why.

My mother has “cut off” her cousin several times for small, insignificant things. She made a cake for her nephew, once, and her cousin didn't thank her enough, so she dropped off the face of the Earth and ignored her for, I think, one or two years. She has a friend that lived in Rhode Island, and she “cut off” this friend several times too, for different, absurd reasons, until it finally stuck and the friend didn't come back.

My father cut off his entire family, dozens of cousins and aunts and uncles, because a few of them missed my First Communion. He hasn't spoken to most of them in over ten years. My grandparents don't talk to them very often, either, if at all, and they don't speak to my great-uncle because he's gay. My grandmother infrequently speaks to him on the phone.

My father explodes so volatily that people steer clear, but my mother is almost artful in her rejection of friends and family. People always come crawling back to my mother because she's an expert at making people think whatever went wrong was their fault, like they broke her heart. I never mastered that kind of manipulation – I cut people off, and they say good riddance, just like my father. Maybe I would have gotten better at it if I hadn't realized it was insane and stopped doing it altogether.

When I do make friends, I am not good at keeping them. I don't understand relationships, how much contact is good, how much is too much, how emotionally vulnerable I should be around people. I'm desperate to find people who understand me, so I overshare. It rarely works out. I think I freak people out more often than not. My fiancé is probably the only one who understands this habit and is okay with it, absorbing whatever I say and taking a few moments to figure out how to respond.

But I do understand, now, after years of gaining and losing friends as a result of my own unknowing sabotage, that not every misstep is intentional. My mother used to say, after I would tell her about a minor slip-up by a friend or a miscommunication that hurt my feelings: "When people show you their true colors, believe them." She also used to say that no one would ever love me like she did, and that we only had one another in this brutal, crushing world. But now I've learned that people make mistakes, and, usually, they are not meant to hurt me. No one is out to get me. The world is not an inherently cruel place. Horrible things happen, people die,

people are abused, relationships fall apart, pets get hurt, you get a bad grade, you get into a fight, a friend ignores you or decides to spend time with other people... but the world is not out to get you. Good things happen, too.

### **Parentification**

Parentification is defined as “a distortion of the parent/child relationship, when the child becomes a caregiver for the parents or primary caregivers. This can mean fulfilling concrete functioning of family life like grocery shopping and paying bills, or meeting emotional needs of the family by being a confidant, companion or conflict mediator” (Evans). Parentification doesn't stop at a parent actively or even passively encouraging their child to take care of the household in order to assist their parents, or babysit their other siblings, however. This inversion of boundaries can make it so that, especially with narcissistic parents who need to be the center of attention, their child can become their therapist, their confidant, their caretaker, or even a substitute spouse, which can cause covert or emotional incest (which has a very similar definition: “When a parent looks to their child for emotional support or treats them more like a partner than a child” (Lee).

Lisa M. Hooper is a researcher very familiar with the debilitating effects of parentification, and says specifically that ““when a child starts serving as a friend to the parent, and the parent is getting his or her needs met through the child — that becomes problematic”” (Lamothe). This parentification, which is intrinsically connected to covert incest, covers all bases: a child taking care of themselves in the absence of a dedicated or involved parent, a child taking care of their siblings in the same case, or a child taking care of a parent who has lost a spouse, divorced or separated from a spouse, or is simply *unhappy* with their spouse, making their child the surrogate. This behavior from parents and the consequences for their children is

glaringly obvious in every literary texts studied in this project. The parentification of a child, especially in a narcissistic family structure, has life-long and devastating effects. In a study from the *Journal of Family Therapy*, “the researchers found that people who experienced early parentification are at an increased risk for anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and substance misuse as an adult” (Lamothe). Gregory Jerkovic, yet another scholar on parentification, writes in his book that “children who take on parental roles during their formative years are later plagued by interpersonal distrust, ambivalence, involvement in harmful relationships, and a destructive sense of entitlement as adults” (Lamothe). When children of narcissists we do not address the harm their parents did to our emotional growth, when we do not hold our parents accountable because we feel responsible for our parents’ happiness and obliged to forgive them for their devastating mistakes, we sabotage ourselves.

In *Sharp Objects* we see some clear examples of parentification. Camille’s mother, Adora, seems like the opposite of the classic narcissistic parent who parentifies their child: she has Munchausen-by-Proxy, a mental illness that compels a parent to sicken a child, becoming the angelic caretaker who deserves sympathy and attention. Amma becomes the target of this game, poisoned and kept complacent and controllable. Camille is discarded, however, because as a child, she wasn’t a “good patient” (242). She is therefore ignored, her emotional needs disregarded, and so she must take care of herself, becoming her own parent. When she has her breakdowns – which is often – she does all the things she hopes her mother would do for her. During her meltdowns she talks to herself: “Easy, easy, I told myself. Easy, sweet girl, you’ll be okay. I petted my cheek, baby-talked myself – how pitiful – but my breathing hushed” (150). Camille seemingly splits into two personalities here, the child that must be soothed, and the parent who does the soothing. Parentified throughout the novel instead of babied and coddled

and, eventually, killed, as her sister was by Adora, Camille has no mother to turn to for emotional support and struggles with its aftermath for her whole life: self-harm, self-sabotage, self-doubt.

The narrator of *The Liar's Club* is, in fact, not the only victim of her parents' parentification. There is also Mary's sister, Lecia. The list of moments where Lecia is the caretaker of her sister, Mary, or either of them are taking care of their parents, is seemingly endless. The most alarming descriptions in the entire memoir come from Mary's detailing of her sister's many expressions, many times juxtaposed with the mention of her facial expression, despite its maturity, being one of a child. There are moments where Lecia looks "serious" (53), "lawyerly" (251), "weary" (252), and, eventually, after a moment where both children were positive their mother was going to shoot Lecia in the head, Mary notes that Lecia's "face floating next to mine in the mirror would never again be the face of a child" (257). Lecia was nine. After living with their mother for a while, Lecia demands that their now-mostly-absent father come get them from their mother's house. Karr reflects on this scenario:

This hits me funny, now. Here you had a fifty-year-old veteran of one major war and innumerable bar fights taking orders from a girl whose age had only recently nudged into the realm of double-digits. (257)

Worryingly, Karr finds this "funny" now, as she is writing the book. Despite most of the opinions and revelations from the book coming from her childhood self, this moment is one that Karr would have had the opportunity to genuinely, maturely look back on, with clarity and, hopefully, a sense of indignance. She may have meant funny as *odd*, but regardless, it's a strange reaction to have when introspecting about the role her sister had when begging their father to come and rescue them from the neglectful and emotionally damaging parenting of their mother

in Colorado who would rather get drunk than spend time with her children. Even now, years after the book has been published, Karr doesn't truly understand the impact of her parents' behavior on her, her sister, or her memoir's readers who see themselves reflected in it. When Karr says that "I can also honestly say that publishing the story freed us from our old shame somehow" (Karr, *The Art of Memoir*, 119) she fails to see that the *shame* she is speaking of, the pain and suffering they were subjected to, has not been addressed. How can she say, proudly, that her "beautiful, outlaw seventy-year old mother received marriage proposals from strangers" or describe how "people wrote how my hard-drinking daddy was now their favorite patriarch" (*Dealing with Beloveds on the Page* 119)? Despite all the suffering and neglect Mary and Lecia faced, Karr seems to have looked past their parents' behavior in order to salvage their family. The lack of permission, or even disapproval, for children of narcissists to hold their parents responsible for their trauma is blatantly obvious in Karr's writing.

In the memoir *Nothing Holds Back the Night*, Delphine seems far more reflective than Karr of the injustices she and her sister faced at the hands of her narcissistic family, specifically her mother Lucile. Delphine recognizes her trauma, noting that she is "writing about Lucile through the eyes of a child who grew up too fast, writing about the mystery she always was to me, simultaneously so present and so distant" (de Vigan 145). Lucile's being "present" generally meant her habit of alarming and worrying her children just for the drama of it: "Lucile liked to swim against the tide, put her foot in it; she knew she was being watched, sometimes looked at us challengingly, enjoyed alarming us and demanded we acknowledge her uniqueness" (283). This is bold narcissism, but Delphine also connects this behavior to her own parentification: it was a "refusal to see us grow up and away from her, a confused desire to reverse our roles, to attract our attention" (264). Lucile, lonely, loveless, a single mother always looking for affection

and attention, converts her children into her partners because she struggles to find one. The most dramatic cry for attention from Lucile is the letter she wrote about her father's rape of her. Despite the fact that her children are just that, *children*, she sends copies of this accusatory (and most likely true) letter to her entire family and gave it to her children to read as well. This distorts both children's view of their family, and when the family does not address it, the children are further disoriented. However, Delphine's judgement of her mother's behavior, and how it affected her and Manon, is watered down by memoirist's boundless forgiveness and admiration of her mother: "Today, I'm able to admire her courage" (340). Ultimately, Delphine too fails to hold her narcissistic parent accountable.

The memoirists in *What My Mother and I Don't Talk About* face their parentification, among other forms of narcissistic abuse, in varied ways. Some, like Melissa Febos and Julianna Baggott, address it as a positive thing, as something that is normal, healthy, and even something to brag about. Febos discusses her concerningly close relationship with her mother throughout her entire piece, mentioning saying that she "did feel part father, part husband," and then positing that "maybe every daughter does. Or just the ones whose fathers have gone" (47). The lack of boundaries between them is most apparent in her statement that "a daughter is wedded to her mother first" (44) and her continued comparison of her relationship with her mother to those of romantic relationships between partners. This misguided acceptance of parentification insinuates a complete lack of boundaries from her mother when Febos was a teenager and zero accountability for her mother now that Febos is an adult.

Munaweera, on the other hand, gives the reader shocking and disturbing details about the parentification her parents enforced on her. From a young age, Munaweera "knew the savior role intimately" (193). Her mother, unable to depend on her husband for affection, care, and



reassurance, turned to her eldest daughter for this type of companionship. When her mother would self-harm, that too was Munaweera's responsibility to fix. In one scene, Munaweera states that she'd had to "wash the blood off her [her mother's] wrists, bind the wound tightly with bandages [...] I put her to bed. I never talk to my dad about it and my sister at eight is too young; she has already seen more than she should" (187). Not only is it Munaweera's job to nurse her mother after a bout of self-destructive behavior, but she is also mature enough or forced to become so, at such a young age, to know how to emotionally and physically take care of her sister. Regardless of these horrific stories about her childhood, Munaweera's low contact lifestyle with her parents is some sort of boundary (she lives far from them, and only speaks to them as much as she can emotionally handle); but it certainly doesn't stop her from sympathizing with her mother and essentially pushing the reader to sympathize with her, as well.

### **Child/Parent/Therapist/Best Friend**

When I was 13, my mother was a martyr. The world was heavy on her shoulders and she was doing her best to hold it up for me and my brother. I cursed those who had hurt her, I hated my father for his callousness and disloyalty; she could do no wrong, and if she did, it was justified.

When I was 13, my father would stay out until three in the morning, who knows where, with who knows who, drinking and spending who knows what.

When I was 13, I knew that my father was cheating on my mother.<sup>4</sup> Homeschooled due to bullying, I was privy to almost everything that happened in my household, though they claimed I wasn't. My nights at this age looked something like this.

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<sup>4</sup> I also knew, perhaps even earlier than this, about my mother's horrific childhood that turned her into the abusive narcissist she is now, and has made her claim that this is "who she is" and she won't "change for anyone." When my mother was young, her father beat her ruthlessly, and she was molested by her cousin (something which none of her family believed or protected her from). When I complained about feeling isolated in my homeschooling, or angry

My mother is in the kitchen, sitting at the scratched kitchen table. I don't know what she is doing, I don't remember. My brother and I are sitting on the couch in the living room, peering over the back, watching her. My father is out, it is maybe one in the morning. We are not in bed because we want to wait up for him.

“Where's Dad? Why doesn't he want to be home with us?”

“I don't know. I don't know<sup>5</sup>.” Helpless frown, helpless shrug. “Why don't you call him?” My brother called him. I sat beside him. He didn't answer the phone the first time; he answered on the third call my brother made. I could hear him, muffled, over the phone. *I'm out, buddy. I'm coming home soon. Tell your mother to put you to bed. Why aren't you in bed?*

When he got home, we ran into the kitchen with her now standing beside us, long freckled arms crossed, frizzy black hair in a messy bun at the back of her head. He looked at us, and we all looked at him, and then she said: “Tell your father why you're still awake.” Her tone was biting, hateful. We told him: we wanted to wait for you to get home. All hell broke loose.

When I think about it now, most of what I remember is comforting my sobbing brother in the corner of the front room while they fought in the kitchen. Paper spiders were hanging from the ceiling. It was October. We were cold; my parents kept the heat low to save money. My

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about my father, or depressed and suicidal, she would tell me that things could be worse, and that I needed some perspective.

<sup>5</sup> She did know. I learned years later, when I had just turned 19, that my mother and father had “opened” their relationship. My mother was no longer attracted to my father, and so he was allowed to go out and sleep with other women. All the times she kept us awake, all the times she cried to me that he was cheating on her, all the times she made us think that he didn't want to be at home with his children... she did know. She knew, and she used it to make us dependent on her, to make us hate him like she did. When I asked her later if this was true, she crossed her arms and sunk into her chair at the kitchen table. My father sat beside me. “Is it true? Yes or no?” I asked her, biting back a roiling fury that was building in my chest. She raised her eyes to me begrudgingly and shrugged, looking like she was about to slither under the table. “Yeah, I guess. Yes. It's true.” Reality turned inside out for me, that day, and was the catalyst for me cutting contact with her and realizing all of the other horrible things she had done to me.

brother's hair was buzzed short and his fingers were still chubby. I remember his eyes welling up with tears and his uncontrollable heaving. I remember how old I felt, and how young he seemed.

I was thirteen.

I don't remember the things my parents said to one another, I don't remember the intensity of my mother's criticism or pleading, I don't remember how long it took before my father stomped up the stairs and started packing his overnight bag, like he did once or twice a month, just to make us think he was leaving us for good.

I remember everything looked red: chaos, noise, resentment, betrayal. We ran up the stairs at the sound of the slamming door, a sound that shook the house, and he let us in after my brother begged for entry. I stood near the door, next to my mother's antique table with its antique Chinese fishbowl. I remember my brother's knees, red from kneeling on the hardwood floors in my mother's bedroom (they no longer slept in the same bed, my father slept on his recliner in the living room downstairs) while my father shoved things in his suitcase and pushed us out of the way.

And so, that fateful Spring morning when she had told me, point-blank, that he was cheating on her, is forever burned into the gray matter of my brain. Her bedroom is maroon, the curtains on her windows and the bedspread are the exact same material, same pattern. I don't know if they even still sell matching bedroom sets that include curtains. I am sitting next to her on this bed, the curtains are pulled over the windows. It is dark, she is crying. She is *crying*. I am sitting next to her anxiously, then I wrap my arms around her.

"Your father is cheating on me," she tells me. "I hate him." I hate him, too. "He's spending all our money on his booze; I don't know what to do." I don't know what to do, either. I hold her, my brain in a flurry. "He's spending all the money we saved for your college. We

can't pay our bills. I don't know what to do, anymore. I don't know what to do." Now she's hysterical. Her face is blown up, pink, her eyes are bloodshot, she has a sheen of either sweat or snot on her upper lip. I am panicking.

"Are we going to lose the house?" I ask. I think about my brother, and how he is always scared to ask for lunch money because of how they argue about money. I think about all the cheese sandwiches on trays the lunch ladies shove into his arms because he is in debt and won't tell our parents until the school calls.

"No, of course not," she scoffs, as if I had just asked a stupid question, and then keeps crying. I tell her everything is going to be okay, and I'm sorry.

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When I was 15, my mother became my jailer. She monitored where I went, who I spent time with. If I did not dedicate a large chunk of my time to her, I was abandoning her.

When I was 15, I started high school, forged shaky social relationships. I was no longer her constant companion. I wanted to be with RJ instead, now, whom I had just started dating, my first healthy relationship, platonic or otherwise. Often, I wasn't allowed to go see RJ because we *spent too much time together*, and so I spent time alone, texting him. When my mother would insist that RJ and I spent too much time together, she would bolster her arguments with the following:

"He's infatuated with you. He makes me nervous. He's obsessed with you, what if you decide to break it off?"

And I would ask her, *why would I break it off?* and she would reply:

“I don’t know, but what if you did? I don’t want to worry about him doing something to you, hurting you, if you didn’t want to see him anymore. I don’t want to find you – I don’t know, tied up in a basement somewhere!”

This utterly baseless accusation was the beginning of my resentment of her, our daily arguments. She would sit up in her room and pout if I wanted to spend time with RJ, she would call me into her room when he left and accuse me of not loving her, and shriek and moan that we didn’t spend enough time together, that she wasn’t important to me anymore. She hated my father, she couldn’t stand to be around him, especially because he would often tell her to leave me alone, that I was behaving like any other teenager (they both had their moments of shocking logicity). She didn’t have any friends, I was her companion, her partner, her best friend.

If RJ came over, she was rude to him, short and terse, giving him dirty looks. On more than one occasion, she has pulled him aside to have a *talk* with him about our relationship. He told me that she would calmly, bitterly tell him that he was “taking me away from her” and brainwashing me into wanting to spend time with him instead of her. That he needed to stop monopolizing my time, stop controlling me. All projection, possessiveness, dependence. She needed me – she couldn’t survive without me. I was born because she needed someone to love her, someone whose *duty* it was to love her and take care of her.

When I was 16, we traveled to Italy with my high school. She had decided that she would come with me on this school trip, as a volunteer chaperone. When things were still uncertain about whether we were going or not – money was tight, as usual – I had told RJ that we might go, and mentioned that, *wow, wouldn’t it be amazing if all three of us could go, if he could come with us?* His parents, evidently, agreed.

In the airport a few months later, in April, she didn't speak. She glared at him, and ignored me whenever I tried to talk to her excitedly about the trip. She tried to stand between us whenever she could.

Every day was like this. She trailed behind the group so far that I got anxious we would lose her, she snapped at us for always holding hands, she wouldn't take pictures of us together. Sometimes she would make me hold her hand as we walked down the cobblestone streets, and make him take pictures of us. I know she did this just to show him where she stood in my life: that she was my life partner, not him.

The worst day, though, was in Rome (after that day, she gave up and became mostly quiet and sulky, aside from a few arguments that blend together, now, and the day she banished RJ to hang with the other strangers on the trip, monitoring whether we were glancing at one another<sup>6</sup>). Or maybe it wasn't the worst day, but it is the scene that sticks out in my memory.

We were at the colosseum; we had a handsome tour guide that all the girls were trying to take selfies with. When RJ and I walked toward the edge of one of the walls to look over into the maze of stone in the bottom of the colosseum, she began to mope and linger around the pillars like an apparition. I tried to wave her toward us, asked her to come look, but she wouldn't, pretending to look around.

Finally, I rolled my eyes at RJ and walked over to her.

"Why are you over here? What's wrong?" I'll admit here, that I don't remember what she said to me in response. She might not have said anything extraordinarily different from what she'd been spitting at me for the past day or two. But I do remember all the eyes of my

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<sup>6</sup> He told me, that night, that all of the guys were disgusting, rating the girls, and that one of them had said I had "a nice ass." The guilt I have for making him spend an entire day with those Neanderthals, instead of with me on our once-in-a-lifetime trip, is immense.

classmates on me as she leaned into my face and called me selfish, ungrateful, hateful (I know she said these words, at least, they were some of her favorites when she was referring to me). Even the other chaperones glanced over with morbid curiosity, trying to figure out why we were sneering at each other and then, eventually, why I was crying while she stood, looking down her nose at me in malicious triumph. She had won. She always did. I stalked out of the colosseum – RJ didn't follow me, I am sure my mother signaled with her eyes that following me meant his imminent death – and sat on one of the stone walls, crying bitterly. What was I doing wrong?

After that public argument, all the parents would look over at me disdainfully. I never understood why, but she told me why, a year or so later, when this was still a sore spot for her, and she was still bringing it up as an example of my apparent hatred for her. She told me that she had told all the other parents what I had done, how I had chosen my boyfriend over my mother, how this was supposed to be a trip for us, but I was too self-absorbed to prioritize her. And that they had all agreed with her, sympathized with her.

I still wonder if she was lying about that.

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My senior year, my brother started high school. He got a D in his algebra class during his first semester. I remember the anxiety that clogged the air for hours as my mother and brother waited for my father to get home. *Wait until your father gets home*, she had sneered at him. I stayed in my room until 6:30 when the screaming started, and then I heard my brother bounding up the stairs. I didn't move; I thought he was grounded, I thought he was pouting and stomping and slamming his door from the unfairness of his punishment. Nothing is fair when you're fifteen. Then I heard my mother howling downstairs, and it didn't sound like it normally did.

I unlocked my door.

My mother ran up the stairs, I recognized the weight of her footsteps.

I opened my door.

She had her arms spread, blocking off the stairs, *no, no, no, don't, John, don't!* My father slowly walked up the stairs, and my feet carried me out into the hallway, eyes fixed, heart beating double time. He noticed me over my mother's shoulder as she sobbed.

"Tell your mother to move." I stood there, blank, empty, shocked into stillness.

"Don't involve her; Mia, go back in your room," she said to me, swiveling her head around, disoriented, panicked. In moments like this, we temporarily forgot our resentment of one another; we were what she wanted us to be. A partnership, a united front against my father.

I could hear my brother crying in his room, pure terror. My father's eyes were red, bloodshot. My father, with cool detachment, moved my mother out of the way. She fought him hard, but he was strong, large, he ran her down, and she fell in front of my brother's room, a wounded doe, begging him not to do it, *do what?* I thought. *What is he going to do?* My mind was barren, but I should have known. It had never gotten this bad, but I should have known.

"Carla, I'll break the fucking door down. Move." He turned his bulging eyes toward me, his face cold and still and full of fury. "Mia, move your mother."

I couldn't move myself. She sobbed and cried out how sorry she was to my brother as my father stepped past her and shoved open the door; she grabbed the belt-loops on his jeans and pulled him back, but he pried her hand off; my brother was screaming, shrill, petrified, as the red walls of his room disappeared from view behind the slow-motion swinging of the door as it shut; I fell to my knees, next to my mother, and pulled her into my arms.

She didn't move out, away from her much-hated husband, until 2018. She left my brother and me behind, in that house. My father began making me do his laundry, and I frequently



cooked for my brother and myself. When I couldn't take it anymore, and moved into RJ's house, I had to leave my brother behind. I cried for him often, angry and bitter and feeling useless that I couldn't do more to help him. Then he stopped speaking to me.

Before my brother cut contact with me, there was a day when my father showed up in our driveway, my sobbing, furious brother in tow. He called me at seven or eight that morning, while I was still lying in bed with RJ and our dog, enjoying my newly won freedom. With a groan, I picked up the phone, debating whether to answer it or not. Engrained obedience compelled me.

“Hello?”

“Come outside.”

“What?” I asked, scrambling out of the bed. RJ looked up at me, bewildered, and I peeked out the window of his – our – bedroom. My father's car was in the driveway. “What are you doing here? I haven't even gotten out of bed yet,” I demanded, pulling on my sweatpants, one foot getting caught in the elastic around the ankle. “My dad is here,” I mouthed to RJ, and he too climbed out of bed and peered out the window with furrowed eyebrows, then shook his head.

“Just come outside.”

“I'm not even dressed!” Gritting my teeth, I stomped out of the room and down the stairs, out the door onto the cracked stone walkway. I reached the car and ripped the door open and slid into the backseat, fuming but saying nothing until I couldn't hold it back: “What?”

My brother was crying angrily, his arms crossed, slouched down in shotgun. He stared straight ahead, silent. I don't remember what the “what” was: bad grades or that he wouldn't get a job. The consequence, though, was that my brother could not get his driving license. I stared at my father and my brother as they began arguing back and forth – my brother's voice high and cracking with puberty – and eventually, I told both of them to be quiet and glared at my father.

“You showed up at RJ’s house to have me settle an argument?” He did it again, that soundless gaping, lips opening and shutting helplessly. “You not letting him get his license isn’t going to solve anything; you’ll just have to keep driving him around, which you complain about and then make me do.” I looked between them; my brother wagged his head victoriously. Jaw set, I climbed out of the backseat and started walking back toward the house. I heard my father get out of the car, the door slammed behind him, and he called after me.

“What’s your problem?” he asked me, and I turned on the spot, feet together, like a soldier, staring him down. This was before he’d grabbed me.

“You can’t just show up here unannounced. It’s not my house, my property.”

“I needed your help, pal.” He closed the distance between us and reached his arms out. I hesitated and then, feeling the weight of daughterly obligation nudge me in the small of my back, let him embrace me. “You’re the smartest, most responsible person I know. You’re the only one I trust with this kind of thing.” I pulled away from him, feeling sickened.

I told him that I am not his wife, and I am not my brother’s mother, and he is never allowed to show up unannounced at our door ever again. He hasn’t.

### **Why Accountability is Vital**

Camille from *Sharp Objects* calls individual instances of support or care from others “small huge gestures” (37). Like when her boss confirms to her that, yes, “sometimes parents aren’t always... good for their kids” (169), or when my mother-in-law sets aside fifteen minutes between holiday parties because she knows I need time to recover from interacting with my family before I can interact with her normal one. Small, huge gestures, but rare.

When we are children, we cannot hold our parents accountable. We are smaller physically, and powerless, and people trust our parents over us even if they see the abuse

firsthand – even we ourselves trust them to do what is best for us, even if their actions prove the opposite. Although Georges, Lucile's father, was regarded as a sexual abuser if not a pedophile, his wife "never questioned Georges's choices and closed her eyes to anything that might tarnish her love for him" (88). When Lucile has a mental break and tries to stick pins in her daughter Manon's eyes, there is no aftercare for her or Delphine, who witnessed it. They received no "psychological help; [Manon] remained with the loneliness of what could not be spoken. It belongs to her; that too is probably part of her character" (216). Children of narcissists rarely have adults who intervene on their behalf and hold their abusers accountable.

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I remember all the times where I wished someone might have gotten involved. My grandparents, my father's parents, who received countless calls from us asking for them to help, and who never did. Who, when I told them all the horrible things my father had done, began to cry and admitted that he wasn't a very good person, but there was *nothing they could have done*. My uncle, my godfather, who gives me pursed-lipped looks of sympathy at family gatherings, and now, so does his wife. Neighbors who watched my brother, small, maybe six or seven, with his ratty red blanket draped over his shoulders and some belongings in a wagon, walk up the street in freezing temperatures because he wanted to run away. I remember my parents watching through the windows, laughing and wondering when he would turn around. Neighbors who heard my father screaming at us in the driveway, who knew stories about how psychotic my parents were and did nothing to save the children living there. My mother-in-law, who, when I started dating her son, heard horror stories about my family, and felt trepidation about her son getting involved with me, with good reason. Friends I have now, who grew up down the street

from me, and knew that my house was one to avoid. My father and mother, enabling one another, letting each other abuse me and my brother in their own unique ways.

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The harm of narcissistic parenting, whether it be physical or emotional, is engrained in us – if we do not have people to hold our parents accountable for their behavior, who will? How can we grow up to be healthy, functioning human beings? Mary Karr admits “none of the neighbors will phone Daddy or the sheriff” (153) when bad things happen in their home. Karr mentions that her “house was Not Right [which] metastasized into the notion that I myself was somehow Not Right, or that my survival in the world depended on my constant vigilance” (10). A child who cannot depend on their parents and, likewise, cannot depend on the kindness and concern of other adults who witness their abuse, realizes that they cannot depend on anybody. Not only that, but due to parentification and the gaslighting of our parents, we may feel responsible and blame ourselves. Cathi Hanauer in which memoir about what from *What My Mother and I Don't Talk About* ponders “Why didn't [my mother] protest my father's bad behavior, to her and her children and others?” (19); Brandon Taylor in which memoir about what blames himself, relaying his guilt with wishes: “I wish I had gotten to know her better [...] I wish I had tried harder. Sooner. This isn't enough. It'll never be enough” (221). These moments are devastating to read, and we feel sympathy and shared pain for the writer.

However, this is not enough for victims of narcissistic parents. Reading something that triggers something inside of us and ends there does nothing but more harm. When these authors write about the undeserved guilt they feel, when they question behaviors and never come to a conclusion, we as readers doubt ourselves: should we forgive, like this author? Should we blame

ourselves, like this author? Should we be more patient, be the *bigger person*, be more tolerant, like this author?

The answer is no. As this essay argues, the effects of narcissistic parental abuse are destructive, life-altering, deforming. And yet, in many of these books and essays, the parents are *not* held accountable by the end. This is a symptom of society's white-knuckled insistence to honor our parents, to respect our elders, combined with a narcissistic parents' demands that their children worship them and forget whatever harm they have caused. Camille's mother Adora is arrested, certainly, for her involvement in the deaths of several children, but Camille's abuse is never confronted, only her trauma over the death of her little sister, Marian. In *Nothing Holds Back the Night*, after hundreds of pages about her family's abuse, Delphine ends the book with a sympathetic, forgiving perspective of Lucile: "Today, I'm able to admire her courage" (340). Anger resides in the pages of this memoir, and yet it is watered down by Lucile's death and Delphine's guilt for not taking care of her mother. In the *What My Mother and I Don't Talk About* collection, writer Munaweera's mother's abuse is justified by her mental illness and its effect on the family structure: "It explained how we worked together as a family to manage, excuse, and ignore what was happening in our house" (197), but in an article after the memoir was published, Munaweera herself excuses her mother's abuse, claiming that her mother has grown and changed though she admits she continually has to set up boundaries, showing her mother *hasn't* truly changed: "She was dealing with racism, sexism, undiagnosed illness, a really violent marriage. She was naive, a schoolgirl" (Fancher).

The point is, what these literary texts have illustrated is that children of narcissists still don't know how to save themselves. A step further, they have reinforced the trope of forgiveness in lieu of accountability, contributing to this very issue. They don't know how to remove

themselves from abusive environments, they don't know how to hold their parents accountable, they don't know how to stop blaming themselves and start the healing process. When people like me read this literature, we take their bad advice because we see ourselves in them, we emulate their bad decisions because we wonder if it might work, if it might help, if *we* are the problem, if it might make our parents love us more.

What people like me *need* is literature that gives us *good* advice, that illustrates ways in which we can save ourselves, ways we can hold our parents accountable, ways our lives could get better if we choose ourselves over the faux stability of a family dynamic we've grown numb to. This literature needs to name characteristics and behaviors as what they are: harmful and inexcusable; the writers of this literature, memoirists in particular, *write* memoir to honor and explore truth and bear witness to events. If they cannot do that reliably, without excusing behavior simply because of blood ties or the culture of family loyalty, they simply perpetuate a cycle of abuse *by* excusing it. What we need is for society to create art that confronts narcissistic parents and shows characters holding them accountable. When that art blossoms into existence, so will we. When more people write memoir about their traumas of narcissistic family lives as I have done here, comparing them to unsuccessful or misguided stories of narcissistic parents, children of narcissists will have role models and instructions for how to grow and heal.

As Camille states: "Righteous indignation. We could have used more of that" (227).

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