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Incest: The Great Betrayal

Ronald E. Hawkins

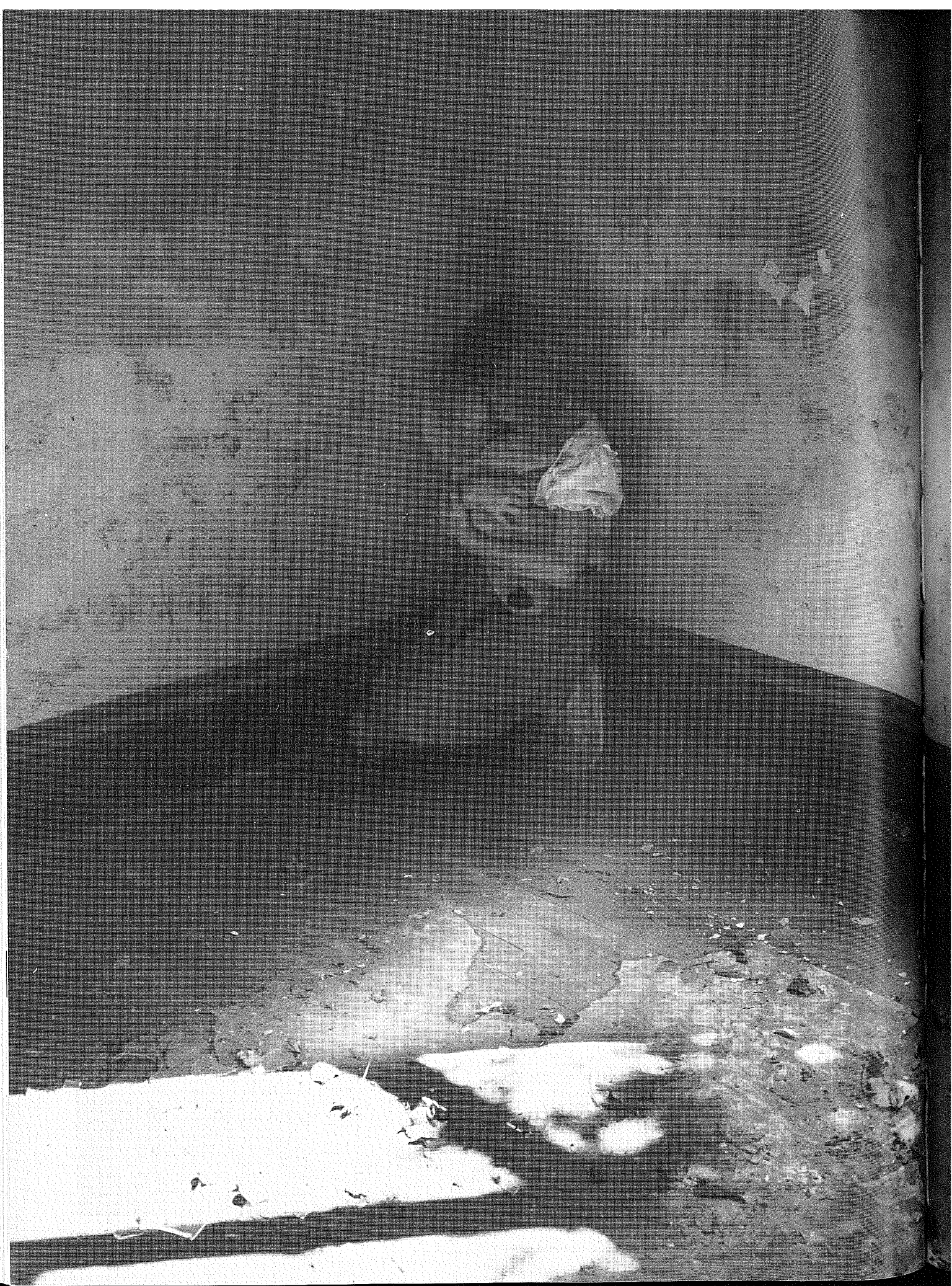
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A black and white photograph of a window with peeling paint on the wall. The window is on the right side of the image, and the wall is on the left. The paint is peeling in several places, revealing a lighter surface underneath. The window frame is dark, and there is some foliage visible outside.

Incest:

The Great Betrayal

by Ronald E. Hawkins and Terry E. Dinsmore

Incest. The mere mention of the word invokes a gnawing uneasiness. The problem is not rare. And it involves even the best families.

Incest is sexual involvement between family members who are too closely related to legally marry. Vandermeij and Neff, in the 1982 winter issue of *Adolescence*, wrote that "though states vary on legal definitions of incest . . . most researchers include as incest all forms of sexual contact, sexual exploitation, and sexual overtures initiated by any adult who is related to the child by family ties or through surrogate family ties." Estimates of the frequency of incest in our culture are very difficult to make, since the majority of instances go unreported. In his book *The Death of Innocence*, Sam Janus writes that "5,000 new cases of incest are reported nationally each year. For every one of those reported cases, 10 to 20 more go unreported."

Realistically, this national tragedy engulfs as many as 100,000 victims every year. Most adults who need treatment for the residual scars of an incestuous experience did not report the episode when it occurred. Many did not even tell their mothers. According to a recent *New York Times* News Service article, "The American Psychological Association estimates that 12 to 15 million Americans have experienced incest, in degrees of seriousness ranging from fondling to intercourse."

Incest occurs in every social class—the poor, middle, and upper class all know the tragedy of this devaluing experience. And no geographical area is immune. Every community in America has its victims who withdraw in fear, wondering if they are unique and somehow to be blamed.

The *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, January 1984 edition, says that "incest affects over 10 percent of all American families, with at least 5,000 cases of father/daughter incest."

Although boys are involved in sibling and mother/son incest, girls are most frequently victims. The girl is overwhelmed and overpowered by the adult male, who abuses his position of power and her need for love and approval. Contrary to the "Lolita concept" popularized in the pornography trades, the child is not the seducer in the incestuous affair with the father, uncle, stepfather, or mother's boyfriend.

A 1977 report from the Sexual Assault Center of Harborview Medical Center in Seattle stated that 81 percent of incest victims are 12 or younger. And according to their 1982 release, the average age is 8, with some assaults beginning with programmatic objectives in infancy. Infants are hardly voluptuous adolescents and these advances cannot in any way be considered beneficial.

Father's Days, by the pseudonymous Katherine Brady, reveals a more accurate account of the embarrassment, anxiety, and fear that surround incest. She declares, "I tell my story now with the hope that other incest victims will hear in it two things I

wished most but had to wait years to learn: You are not alone and you are not to blame." The victim is engulfed with feelings of guilt and anger. The feelings are frequently unmanageable and may precipitate serious emotional and sexual dysfunction. Janus notes that "among prostitutes, the frequency of sexual molestation in childhood is 92 percent; 67 percent of them experience some sort of incestuous assault. At least 75 percent of runaways, on the national average, are escaping incestuous abuse." Incest victims often describe their homes as "a filthy and dirty place." The emotional climate in the home is usually described as "cold."

Estimates in the FBI magazine say that "20 to 30 percent of disturbed children have been involved in an incestuous relationship."

Incest loudly declares, "I want your body. You are only of value to me if I can use you physically. The rest of you is valueless." Little wonder so many of these turn to lives of prostitution as the only way to affirm their value. Others, sadly, will shut down their sexuality, feeling it is an arena of dirtiness and filth in their lives. They will perhaps marry and have children but they will never feel valued. They will always feel

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betrayed and will wrestle with guilt and anger. In the presence of such devastation, the sexual libertines still support their thesis that incest can be a healthy experience.

Reflecting contemporary attitudes toward incest, recent literature is mixed in its analysis of the impact of incest on the life of the young child. Benjamin DeMott, in an article in *Psychology Today*, attacked what he labeled a "pro-incest lobby" in psychology. According to those lobbyists, the softening of attitudes toward incest is required, because the incidence rate is so high that prohibition is futile, and the actual act is less harmful than the guilt surrounding it. DeMott cites a paper delivered by Joan Nelson at the American Psychiatric Association's Institute on Hospital and Community Psychiatry. As a child she participated in "an ongoing incestuous relationship which seemed to be caring and beneficial . . . There was healthy self-actualization in it."

Much of the contemporary "porn" material portrays incest as a tender and romantic relationship. John Irving's *Hotel New Hampshire* is just one of many current books that tend to legitimize this kind of depraved thinking. The rising incidence

of incest is rooted in the free sexism of the pornography industry. Men face a bombardment of "celluloid adultery." When pornography becomes part of a man's reading routine, his marriage relationship is dynamically impacted. Any woman becomes fair game to fulfill his sexual fantasies. Depersonalized females exist only to serve his sexual needs. No one is exempt from the tragedy of his unbridled appetite. Often he claims that his wife is not the sexual partner he needs. He therefore feels entitled to meet his needs—regardless of the effects to others.

In counseling, many of these men appear broken, but they have a terrible moral cancer, and only a radical commitment to a new way will make possible their deliverance. God has mandated, "None of you shall approach to any that is near of kin to him, to uncover their nakedness" (Lev. 18:6).

The last verse of the Old Testament is a verse that relates to the family. "And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse" (Mal. 4:6) Fathers are called of God and enabled by God to perform many tasks. These tasks are essential to the proper functioning of any society.

God established the institution of the family and placed upon the man the responsibility for maintaining an atmosphere conducive to healthy physical, emotional, and spiritual development. In his introduction to *How to Be Happy Though Married*, Tim LaHaye writes: "He [God] wants the home to be a haven of love where husband and wife and children live with a sense of security and a feeling of acceptance. With all the turmoil and violence outside the home, everyone needs some place in life where he is surrounded by peace and love. God ordained the home as that place of emotional safety."

Every child is born with the need to be loved and the expectation that his parents will serve as a primary source of that love. The withholding or distorting of love is a betrayal of biblical priorities, causing instant provocation and resulting in great anger in the heart of the child.

Horrible damage can be avoided when fathers are yielded to Jesus Christ and model the character traits of a bondservant. The servant's priorities are clearly set forth in Exodus 21:5-6. God's servant is first a man of God and second a man of family. Fathers work, teach, protect, and guide, but nothing a father does is more important than teaching his family the real meaning of love.

God's servant never exercises his personal prerogatives in a selfish way. Although the bondservant in Exodus 21 was free to go and leave his family, he refused to do so. In the presence of the opportunity for personal freedom, he chose to teach his family the meaning of commitment and love. His heart was toward his family and although the awl would bring some pain, his family and his own life would know great power because of his commitment to the way of love.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians is a reminder of the tragic impact of sexual immorality on the human family. Although



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Terry E. Dinsmore is a practicum intern in the Liberty Baptist College Counseling Center. He received his M.A. in counseling from Liberty Baptist Seminary.

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Accepting Christ as Saviour meant the end of all such actions, and Christians were to find a new life in Christ. However, Paul wrestles in the fifth chapter of 1 Corinthians with the reality that sexual immorality continued to plague the church. His advice to them encompassed both sternness and mercy, lest the offending brother be swallowed up with sorrow (2 Cor. 2:6-8).

Healing takes time, but some actions can be taken to hasten the healing process. Talking about the encounter with a counselor or mature woman provides an opportunity to get the experience out of oneself. The support of a caring and trained listener can do much to begin the journey toward healing. If the experience is forced inward and never talked about,

it will serve as a magnet to gather all manner of debris in the inner life. The externalizing of the violation, accompanied by the acceptance and understanding of the listener, creates hope. When the victim feels accepted in this sharing, she can, in spite of her terrible ordeal, dare to believe she can be loved.

The victim must be willing to give up feelings of guilt and bitterness. Guilt is often predicated on the idea that somehow she must be to blame for what has happened. Such guilt is seldom, if ever, based on fact and must be surrendered as irrational and unproductive.

Certainly bitterness against the offender is understandable, but this must also be given up. Ultimately more damaging to the bearer than to the intended object, bitterness will torpedo any attempt to live meaningfully and pursue holiness and must therefore be given over to the Lord and surrendered to the power of His forgiveness. Without the resultant freedom that such giving up precipitates, the victim will never enjoy herself, her sexuality, and her relationships.

The process of healing is nearing completion when the girl can begin to understand how a sovereign God can turn even the experience of incest into an opportunity for ministry. God, who turned Joseph's tragedies in Egypt into good (Gen. 50:20), can turn the horror of incest into an opportunity to minister to the needs of people.

The power of His love and forgiveness is so great that it can melt the power of evil from our lives and set us on our feet to become ministers of His consolation (2 Cor. 1:3-7). The greater the injury from which His healing comfort has delivered us, the greater our potential use as ministers of His comfort. □

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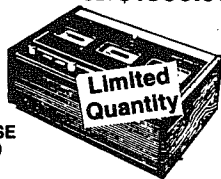
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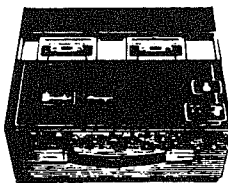


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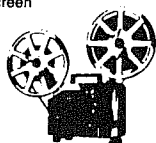
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