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Jackie’s story

Introduction

My research for this study has necessitated the usual trawl through modern data banks and long-forgotten texts in once venerable, now defunct titles. It has also taken me to numerous unlikely places throughout the mainland and beyond; to coroners inquests and Crown Courts and Her Majesty’s prisons. I came into contact with many family members and friends during this time, including a woman whose husband had killed their children, and then committed suicide. She had once given a brief anonymous interview to a journalist. I was struck by the degree of similarities in her case and in so many of the cases I had been studying. I asked her if she would be willing to submit to a (much lengthier) questionnaire for my study. She wrote to me saying that she would be ‘happy to help in any way possible ... BUT, I do not want my children’s pictures or names used, or my surname’. There was no possibility of me doing that, yet during the period which followed, I was preoccupied with discomforting questions. The all-abiding preoccupation for the woman was: could anonymity be maintained? I was reasonably confident it could; I have been writing about and anonymizing actual child abuse and mental health cases for over 30 years. But this was a case which, like every other filicide-suicide case, was so heavily publicized, nationally, in the press, on radio, on television and on the internet. For that reason, I agreed to let her read the chapter before I would submit to a publisher. She didn’t ask for that, nor did she seek the right to ‘edit’ the chapter, she merely wanted to be reassured that anonymity had
been maintained. It was not herself she was primarily concerned about; it was her family.

I emailed her a 17-page structured questionnaire, containing 85 questions. The questions were grouped under 10 sections: Background, Developing problems, Father's relationship with children, Mother's perception of father, Children's perspective of parents in conflict, The killings, Balance of power, Aftermath, The inquest and In retrospect. Many of the questions must have evoked powerful and painful memories, and perhaps much regret. She completed it within about three weeks. The answers were characteristically blunt, honest, incisive and totally without self-pity or sentiment. Some were witty and self-deprecating. Over the following 12 months, we maintained contact. She was remarkably patient and tolerant when I sought clarification and explanation on so many issues her answers raised. The emails we exchanged continuously enhanced my understanding of the person, and of the circumstances and processes by which two people, loving parents, and, at one time deeply in love, can unwittingly and unwillingly choose a course of action that may lead to a catastrophe.

With more licence in altering material facts than usual therefore (in order to protect her anonymity), this is Jackie's story. Her experience, memories, perceptions and opinions have not, however, been altered in any way. Within her tragedy lie lessons for us all.

Origins

Jackie and Martin lived together in the north of England for about eight years before marrying. They had two children during this period, Kevin, aged 7, and Lois, aged 5. They had two more children during marriage, Jonathan, aged 4, and Carina, aged 2.

Jackie recalls a generally happy, privileged childhood and upbringing, unlike Martin, whose family experienced a series of tragedies and ill-health, including the suicide of his sister at the age of 17, an event from which he never fully recovered, nor forgot. Their early education was similar, though Jackie left school at 16 and immediately started work in catering. Martin went on to further education, and completed training in hotel management. It would be a job that would necessitate a good bit of travel and frequent periods away from home, a fact that would have some bearing on their future marital life.