

LADIES'
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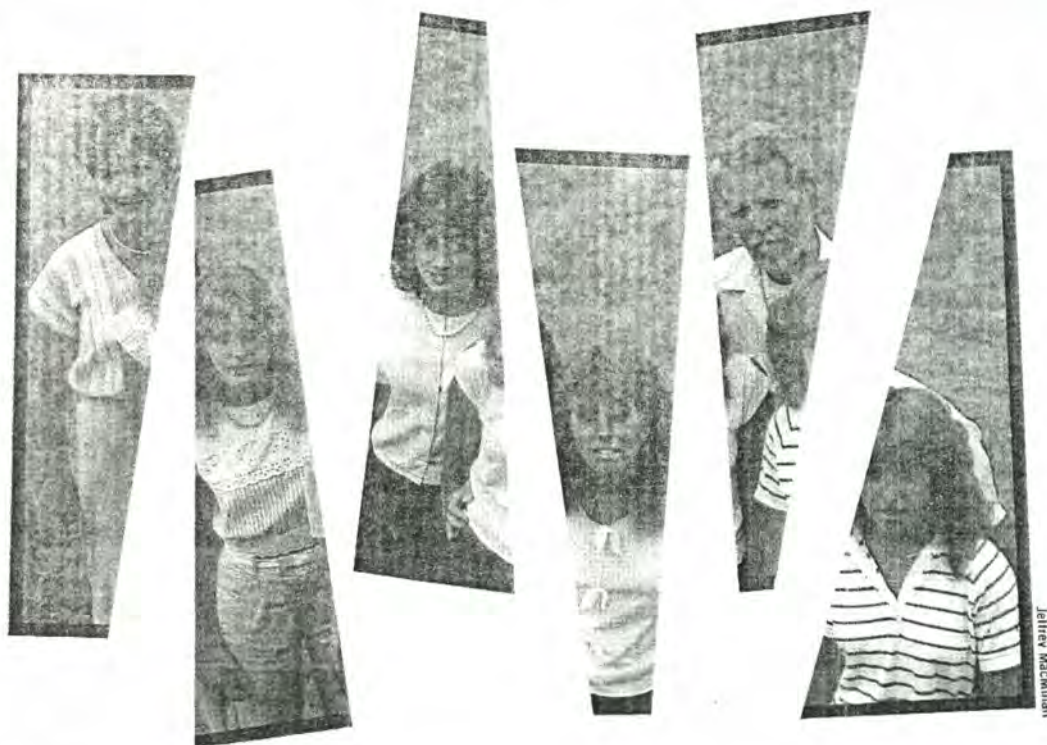
THE ORDEAL



Jeffrey MacMillan

OF AN AMERICAN FAMILY

BY PATRICK PACHECO



Jeffrey MacMillan

This is the story of a family that came apart with much pain, and came together with much love. It is a story you won't forget.

It was a beautiful spring day five and a half years ago, and Jean Richwein spent most of the morning playing with the puppy instead of doing housework. Her four daughters, aged eight to fourteen, loved animals, and the Richweins' house in a suburb of Baltimore was home to a large menagerie.

Karyn, the eldest, said she wanted to be a veterinarian and continually dragged home wounded animals. Jean, thirty-seven, a registered nurse, tended their wounds before trying to find them homes.

Thinking about Karyn, Jean wondered why lately everything was becoming such a battle with her. Just that morning, Karyn had argued endlessly because she wanted to wear a Black Sabbath rock band T-shirt to school. Muttering darkly, she'd finally left wearing the oxford cloth shirt Jean had laid out.

The telephone ring disturbed Jean's thoughts, and she almost tripped over the puppy on her way

to answer it. Her pensive mood quickly turned to disbelief, then shock, as she listened to her caller. It was a woman from the vice-principal's office at Karyn's high school.

"Mrs. Richwein, we believe your daughter has ingested a dangerous substance. Please come to the high school as soon as possible."

The words burned in Jean's ear, and her legs buckled into a kitchen chair. Trembling, she misdialed her husband's office twice before she got through. But Roy, thirty-nine, an engineer, wasn't in. She fumbled for the car keys and raced to Mount Hebron High School in Ellicott City, Maryland, a small, historic town. She prayed aloud the entire way in a quavering voice. "Please, God. Please make it a mistake. Not Karyn. Not my Karyn."

Karyn was in the gym teacher's office, slumped in a chair. She was conscious, but her eyes were unfocused and she could barely stand. Jean, from her experience as a

nurse, recognized the symptoms of a drug overdose.

The vice-principal explained that Karyn had left the school grounds with her friend Sally. When she returned, it was obvious that she had taken something.

"Why did you do this, Karyn?" Jean asked more loudly than she had intended. "Why?" It was only much later that Jean realized why Karyn's clothes looked so odd: Jean could see Karyn's Black Sabbath T-shirt showing underneath her button-down shirt.

Once home, Jean learned from Sally's mother that the girls had discovered a bottle of Demerol, a potent painkiller, in the medicine cabinet in Sally's home. Karyn had taken four hundred milligrams, a potentially fatal dosage for a young girl. Jean immediately phoned the doctor and described Karyn's symptoms. The pediatrician was reassuring: "Drug reactions vary from individual to individual. It appears

that it would take a much larger dose to slow your daughter's racing motor, Mrs. Richwein." Watching Karyn playing with the puppy, Jean had to agree that the effects were wearing off.

"Mommy, do you have to tell Daddy?" Karyn asked, frightened. "He'll be angry and won't speak to me."

Jean dreaded telling Roy about the overdose. He did not come home until late that night, after Karyn and the other girls had gone to sleep. As he was undressing for bed and discussing his day, Jean interrupted him with the terrible news. He continued to undress in silence after his wife finished.

"Well, aren't you going to say anything?"

"I'm tired," Roy said curtly. "I've had a tough day. I'm going to bed."

"Your daughter almost died of an overdose and you have nothing to say to her?" she demanded. "What's your responsibility in all of this?"

Roy felt powerless and hated that feeling more than anything else in the world. It was important for him to always be in control—of his work, his emotions, his family.

Jean woke Karyn up and brought her into the room, and Roy recognized in her young face the fear with which he had always faced his own father. He wanted to say so many things to her: "Please don't hate me. I do love you. Please, please don't ever do it again." But all he could do was embrace his weeping daughter. For the first time, Jean saw tears running down her husband's cheeks. She left them alone and went out on the deck adjacent to the bedroom. She knew that though there were problems in their marriage, she would never love Roy as much as she did at this moment.

The day after the overdose, Jean and Karyn, who had been suspended from school for the rest of the week, painted the outside of the house. It gave them a chance to talk, and Jean prided herself on what she thought was an open, honest relationship with her daughter.

"Have you ever smoked marijuana?" asked Jean.

"No," replied Karyn too quickly. "Well, yeah, but only once. Mom, it's not so bad, is it? Everybody says it isn't any worse than alcohol."

"Honey, people will always find reasons to do what they want to do," Jean answered. "It doesn't make it right. Marijuana, alcohol, all drugs are bad. Please promise

me that you'll never do it again."

Karyn promised.

"My promise lasted for five days, then I started smoking again. I was twelve when I took my first puff of pot. By the time I got to Mount Hebron, I did drugs almost every day—mostly pot and alcohol. I was terrified of going to high school. I thought nobody would like me. Then I discovered if you did drugs, you were cool. On the morning I overdosed at school, first I took the pills at Sally's house, and when nothing happened, I took a couple more. Then later, we drank some Jack Daniel's. We made it back to school, but the next thing I knew I was on the floor and it felt like I was going to die."

Even though Karyn had promised not to take drugs again, the Richweins took her to a drug counselor recommended by the high school. The counselor was reassuring. "Mr. and Mrs. Richwein, your daughter doesn't have a drug problem," she said. "She's just experiencing the normal adolescent emotional difficulties."

Karyn was restricted for the summer because of the overdose. She couldn't go out unless either Jean or Roy was with her. Jean watched her like a hawk, surprised that she took it so well. Even though there were ripples in the seeming calm—Karyn and her mother argued incessantly over clothes and makeup—the Richweins felt good about the resolution of the crisis. Each night when Karyn kissed her parents good night, Jean whispered a prayer of thanks.

On one such summer night, Jean awakened to hear a knocking at the door. She looked out the window to see a police car parked in front of the house. It was four A.M. She felt her stomach tighten as she and Roy scrambled downstairs.

"Mr. and Mrs. Richwein," said the officer, "we have your daughter Karyn down at the station. She and a boy were picked up joyriding in a stolen vehicle. Would one of you come with us?"

"I'm sorry, officer, but you're mistaken," protested Roy. "Our daughter is asleep in her bedroom downstairs."

The officer, who had heard this response many times from other parents, insisted he was correct. Still incredulous, Roy and Jean led him to Karyn's room at the far end of the house. The *(continued on page 168)*

There was a knock at the door. "Mr. and Mrs. Richwein," said the police officer, "we have your daughter down at the station." Roy protested, "You're mistaken, officer. Our daughter is asleep." Roy and Jean led the police officer to Karyn's room. The door was locked. With a sinking feeling, they realized she was gone. Roy forced the lock and they went inside. An autumn chill blew through the open window.

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door was locked. With a sinking feeling, they realized she was gone. Roy jimmied the lock and the door flew open. An autumn chill blew through the open window.

"After I was restricted for the summer because of the overdose, I'd wait till everybody was asleep, then I'd sneak out the window. I'd go joyriding with friends, kids from the neighborhood, in cars we'd 'borrow' from our families or neighbors. We usually did drugs—a hit of speed, a tab of acid, angel dust, a couple of joints or uppers or downers.

"Sometimes I'd go out alone. See, even though I ran around with this group at school, I felt lonely. When I overdosed in the spring, not one person came to see me, and I felt bad about that. I'd go sit in a field for hours, picking out the constellations in the sky and wondering where I fit into it all. My best friend was really my sister Sandi. I turned her on to drugs when she was about thirteen, partly to keep her from snitching, but mainly because she always wanted to do what I did. She liked what I liked; she looked up to me."

Seeing the stricken look on Jean's face, the policeman sought to comfort her. "Don't worry, Mrs. Richwein, it's just kids being kids."

Kids just being kids, thought Jean as she waited for Roy to return from the precinct. How much could "normal adolescent behavior" cover? At least there weren't any drugs that night. The police told Jean that they searched the kids and the car and had found none.

Roy was seething. The sight of his daughter in the holding cell hurt and angered him. "I was too soft," he decided. He had to run a tighter ship, turn this thing around before it got out of control.

"We weren't doing anything wrong!" screamed Karyn. "It was his sister's car. Didn't you ever go out looking for fun when you were a kid?"

"You're restricted again until I tell you otherwise," shouted Roy. He stormed off to bed, leaving Jean alone in the kitchen with her daughter.

"I'm sorry," Karyn was conciliatory. She looked like a lost urchin, and Jean felt her anger melting. She thought, If only she yelled and screamed at me like she does at her father, it would be easier to discipline her. But she knew that for the next two weeks at least, Karyn would do the housework, be charming and funny, and Roy's strictness would appear even more unfair.

Upstairs in the bedroom they shared, the two youngest girls lay apprehensively awake. "I wonder" (continued)

what she did now?" said nine-year-old Wendy to her older sister Dianne.

"I don't know and I don't care." The reply was cynical for an eleven-year-old. "Go to sleep, Wen." Dianne was frightened. The police and everything. She cried softly into her pillow.

The Richwein home was becoming a battlefield. The more Roy cracked down—giving Karyn more and more chores to do and curtailing her social life—the more intractable she became, and Sandi was picking up some of the same bad habits. Jean felt alone and under siege; Roy used work more and more as an excuse to stay away from home, and she resented the way he came in, laid down the law and then left it to her to enforce it.

The rifts between Jean and Roy were widening, and Karyn and Sandi, now fifteen and fourteen years old, seemed to know exactly how to drive the wedge in deeper.

"Dave pulled out a gun and pointed it at me. I was frightened but fascinated. I knew it was going to be a different kind of joyride that night. The guys were trying to impress us with how tough they were. 'We're going to rob a 7-Eleven. Wanna come?' Candy and I didn't want any part of it, so I told them to drop us off at my boyfriend Robert's house and to come pick us up only if they didn't rob the store. I was really glad Sandi hadn't come with us that night. When the car pulled up later, we saw all these cartons of cigarettes and cash in the back seat, but nobody said anything. A couple of weeks later I almost jumped out of my skin when Mom showed me a newspaper article about the armed robbery. 'Don't you know these guys?' she asked me. I answered something lame like, 'Yeah, what a shock! They're from such good families, too.'"

Jean was just about to go out the door when the phone rang. She'd taken the afternoon off from her part-time job at the hospital to spend several hours with Dianne and Wendy. It was their annual school field day.

The police were on the phone. They wanted her to pick up Karyn at school and bring her to the station immediately. Her name had come up in connection with the armed robbery she had read about in the papers.

Jean tried to keep her quaking voice under control. "I'm going to take you to school, but I can't stay. Karyn's in serious trouble, and I have to help her."

Wendy's large brown eyes became thoughtful. "Does this mean there's going to be a lot of yelling and crying when Daddy comes home?"

"I hate her!" snapped Dianne. "Why doesn't she go away and leave us alone!"

"Dianne!" Jean took her daughter's

face in her hands and held it close. "You don't mean that. There's not enough love in this family right now, and that's part of the problem. Please help me," she pleaded to both her daughters. "I promise you I'll make it right again, and there won't be any more screaming or yelling." As much as she meant it, the promise sounded hollow.

"I don't know what's going on, but I have a feeling you do," Jean accused Karyn as they drove toward the police station. She warned her, "If you've ever told the truth in your life, now is the time to tell it. I've always protected you, but this time it's out of my hands."

At the police station, fear erased Karyn's usually smug demeanor, and she answered the detective's questions honestly. Satisfied that she had no part in the robbery, he told Jean that no charges would be pressed.

True to her word, Jean saw that there was no more screaming and yelling at the house that night. There were a lot of slamming doors, however, and behind them, the family brooded in fear, anger and pain.

"I really felt awful when I hurt my family, especially my mom. But no matter how hard I tried to be good, I ended up making a mess of things. I'd work real hard at school and at the end of the term, I couldn't even pass gym. My parents decided that Sandi and I would transfer to Mount De Sales Academy, the Catholic school, and repeat our school year because our marks were so bad. They thought that it would get us away from the bad element, but the bad element is everywhere. I was the bad element; that's how I thought of myself.

"At Mount De Sales, I was determined to do good and even got some A's first term, then I just fell flat on my face. I felt even more worthless and hopeless. I was losing my self-esteem because of boys, too. Among the heads I hung around with, sex was expected.

"One day Sandi and I were at a party when a guy pulled out some cocaine and a needle and started to shoot up. 'Can you do that to me?' I asked him, and he said sure. It was the most incredible high, and after that I started shooting up a lot. Then I began stealing money from family and friends, small amounts that weren't noticed.

"I wore long-sleeved blouses, but I never worried about Mom finding out. I mean, who checks a sixteen-year-old girl's arms for needle tracks?"

Jean had a strong suspicion that Karyn was on drugs, but she could get no help or confirmation from professionals. After they exhausted the resources of the school guidance counselors and drug counselors, the Richweins took

Karyn to a widely known psychologist, who again tried to allay their fears. "I wouldn't be unduly worried about drugs, Mrs. Richwein," said the psychologist. "Karyn has emotional problems at school and at home. You and Mr. Richwein have to learn to let go, stop imposing your morality on her. In time, these things have a way of clearing up on their own."

But the relief that Jean felt when a professional attempted to reassure her lessened as the months went by. Whenever she brought up the possibility of Karyn's continued drug use to a counselor, psychologist or teacher, they'd dismiss the idea.

When Karyn became ill with hepatitis, Jean braced herself again for confirmation that Karyn was on drugs. She knew that hepatitis could be transmitted through dirty needles, and was often an illness of addicts. She confronted the pediatrician who had cared for Karyn since she was six. "Is there any way this is related to drugs?" she asked.

"Only insofar as it's a reaction to a prescription I gave your daughter for that bad sinus infection, Mrs. Richwein," he replied.

Jean caught his eye and looked at him directly. "I meant street drugs."

"Not to my knowledge," the doctor replied, meeting her gaze. Once again, Jean seemed to be the only one who was convinced that Karyn's problems were drug-related.

"When I was a little girl, my father took me fishing. When I saw the fish flapping in the fish box, I screamed, 'They're suffocating!' and I threw water on them so they wouldn't die. That's the way I felt on drugs—like a fish flapping and dying in the hot sun. I couldn't complete a thought or a sentence, and I felt like my head was going to split open if I didn't physically hold it together."

"One day I came home from school tripping on acid. Voices in my head were screaming how worthless I was, so I tried to drown them out by turning on my stereo real loud. Dianne came in to tell me to turn it down. I picked up a pair of scissors and threw them at her, missing her by inches. She just stood there looking at me, terrified."

Jean was furious when Dianne told her about the scissors incident. She stormed into Karyn's room and confronted her daughter. "Get out! I'm tired of your selfishness, your lack of decency or regard for me or the family or for yourself. Pack your bags and leave this house now!"

Karyn raised her arm to hit her mother, and Jean slapped her hard for the first time in her life. Her hand stinging, she left the room,

climbed five stairs and collapsed in sobs against the railing. Violence never solved anything, and she knew she had done it out of frustration and rage. Still, Jean fought back the urge to apologize. She wanted Karyn to know just how angry she was, and she resolved not to undermine her own authority as she had done so many times before.

That evening, long after everybody else had gone to bed, Jean stayed awake, lying on the living-room couch and thinking. It was there that Karyn found her mother. Karyn's face had been scrubbed clean and she wore a nightgown. Jean was always amazed at how young and innocent her daughters looked after they put away the hard, crude adult masks they wore during the day. She felt her anger melting and she opened her arms. Crying, Karyn laid her head in her mother's lap.

"Karyn, what is it?" asked Jean. She smoothed her daughter's hair as she had done so many times before.

"Mama, I think I'm going insane."

"You can tell me, Karyn. I'll understand."

Then, never once looking at her, Karyn told Jean about her drug-taking in a long, scorching litany, and concluded, "I was going to shoot up heroin this weekend. Mother, I need help."

As Jean listened quietly, she felt a nightmarish fog lift. She could see the landscape for the first time. It was a bleak landscape, but at least she felt as if she were seeing clearly. "You're precious to me, darling. I promise that your daddy and I will do everything to see that you will be well again. You never need to worry. It's all over." They lay there for hours in silence, Karyn in a fetal position on her mother's lap, until Jean went to tell Roy.

The next day, Roy and Jean called the family together and told them about the gravity of Karyn's problem. Then they decided that the best move would be to enroll Karyn in a drug-rehabilitation program as quickly as possible. There were four thousand drug programs in the country to choose from. After a couple of days of frantic phone calls, the Richweins spoke with the parents of one of Karyn's classmates, who were pleased with the progress their daughter was making at a well-known psychiatric hospital in Texas. Jean and Roy were assured that their daughter would be well at the end of the treatment. (The Richweins still had no inkling that Sandi, too, was involved with drugs.) Just before she walked through the locked doors of the drug-abuse ward of the hospital, Karyn turned to give her parents a weak smile. Jean lifted praying hands to her lips: "Dear God, help her."

"I was terrified on that first day. Everyone was staring at me as I walked down the dormitory hall with my suitcase. A guy came up to me and asked me if I had any pot. I thought he was kidding. He wasn't. I spent most of my time there high on the prescription drugs the doctors gave me."

"When I left, they put me on lithium 'to even out my emotional peaks and valleys,' they said. I left Texas with a prescription, a new boyfriend and the feeling that I was really straight because I wasn't doing street drugs."

The hospital sent Jean and Roy regular reports of the therapies and medications that Karyn was receiving on a daily basis. It took a leap of faith for Jean to be convinced that treating drug abuse with another type of drugs was going to solve the problem. But any reservations that Jean had evaporated when Karyn came home. She was better dressed and her manner was congenial. She even looked healthier. Jean thought she had her daughter back again.

Karyn and Sandi began working at a local antidrug organization that Roy and Jean had started while their daughter was in Texas. The girls spent every Friday night at the center, working as drug counselors and discussion leaders. There, two months after Karyn's return, Sandi confronted her, "You're stoned aren't you, Karyn?"

Jean knew there was trouble again, too, and it made her feel like a fool. The replay of tensions and arguments at home took away the last vestiges of her hope. Instinct told her that Karyn was back on drugs and that Sandi was becoming deeply involved as well. While cleaning Sandi's room, she found a drawing that seemed to confirm her suspicions. It was of an eyeball dripping blood and tears.

The depth of her despair came to her one night while she waited up, as she always did, for Karyn and Sandi to return home from a double date. They were late—it was well past their midnight curfew—and she became fearful. She was shocked to find herself thinking, I hope there was an accident. I hope they are dead. Then, at least, it would all be over, finally over. At least that way she would no longer be imprisoned by hope. And she would know that nobody could hurt them, and that they could no longer hurt the family. The lights of the car interrupted her thoughts, and she felt guilty. Has it come to this? she thought.

Jean confided her fears to her husband. "I'm worried, Roy," she told him one night as they lay in bed. "I'm worried that we're not going to make it." That night Jean confided in Roy, pouring out feelings about their marriage

that she had held in check for the twenty years they had been together. She was scared. She'd never been so open and honest with him, or so vulnerable. Please don't block me out, she thought.

Roy listened and then spoke softly. "I don't know how you've put up with me all these years, Jean," he responded tenderly. "I've always been terrified that you'd leave me. I know I'd be lost." But that night they talked until dawn.

In a diary entry from that weekend, Roy wrote, "As long as my wife and I love each other, no matter what happens to the kids, we can handle it."

"Sandi and I decided to run away when I was seventeen and she was sixteen. My parents had forbidden us ever to see our boyfriends, Dan and John, again, and so, because they were being evicted from their apartment, they said, 'Why don't you come with us to California?' That morning I went into Wendy's room. I hugged her and said, 'I love you very much.' I did the same to Dianne and my mom. I knew it would hurt them, but I thought, I'm a screw-up. They'll be better off without me."

Something snapped in Jean when she received the phone call from the high school telling her that the girls had been seen leaving school in a station wagon with two young men, and that a student had overheard them talking about their plans to run away to California. How could they do this to me? thought Jean. If they really loved me, how could they do this?

After the call, Jean went up to her daughters' rooms. She ripped down rock 'n' roll posters, tore clothes off hangers, and piled books, records and magazines in a heap in the middle of the floor, as if to torch the sordid past in a bonfire. Dianne came into the room and sat on the bed, watching her mother work with increasing frenzy. She was frightened. "Mom, our whole family is falling apart."

Jean stopped and remembered the promise she had given to her younger daughters, the promise to make things right again. What am I doing?, she thought. I have a family to take care of. She embraced Dianne tightly, and they wept in each other's arms. Strengthened by prayer, Jean plotted to bring everybody back together again. That was all that mattered.

Roy's reaction to the girls' running away was different. He was overcome with a fierce anger. Running away was the final, unforgivable outrage. As Roy saw it, Sandi was just a follower, but Karyn had jerked and pulled apart their lives for far too long. I don't even want a Christmas card or a birthday card or a Father's Day card from her, he

thought bitterly.

Knowing how strongly Roy felt about Karyn's betrayal, Jean decided to argue only on Sandi's behalf. She felt that if she could convince Roy to help Sandi, eventually she could reason with him to help Karyn, too. She told him, "This is the first time Sandi has really done anything so very bad. I think she deserves a chance." Roy agreed.

This time, the Richweins decided to look into a Florida-based drug-rehabilitation program called Straight Incorporated. Staff members from Straight had spoken at the local antidrug organization. Although Straight's methods are controversial, Jean had been impressed with the program's emphasis on family participation, the use of peer pressure, and the fact that, unlike the program in Texas, Straight was totally drug-free. She had told Roy, "If we need help again, this is where we'll go."

The Richweins flew to Florida to meet with the program directors.

The counselors at Straight told the Richweins that if they could get Sandi to the clinic, they would do the rest. When the meeting was over, Jean lingered in the office after Roy left to whisper that they would eventually be bringing in two of their daughters.

Three days after the girls had run away, Jean began to get calls from Karyn. They were brief, since the girls didn't want them to be traced. They were in St. Louis, they were in Las Vegas, they had arrived in San Francisco and were staying with the grandmother of one of the boys. When Karyn called again, Jean told her, "There's a prepaid ticket for Sandi at the San Francisco airport. It can't be cashed in. If she is not on the next plane for home, Karyn, you better start running, because I'm hiring a private detective to track you down and press charges. You'll be eighteen soon, but Sandi's underage. We'll prosecute you."

"I felt guilty about Sandi, so I made sure she was on that plane. Then Dan and I took off for Los Angeles. We stayed in Venice in the garage of a house that Dan's sister shared with a bunch of rock musicians. One day, walking along the beach, I remembered the time when I was a child and we were moving from Florida to Maryland. It was dark, early in the morning, and the four of us—I was six, Sandi was five and Dianne and Wendy were babies—were lying in the back of the station wagon, our limbs all tangled and warm. I remember looking up at the stars and feeling so secure and happy. Merry Land, I thought. We're going to Merry Land. When I came back to the garage, I didn't have any drugs, so I just took out this hypo I found on the dirty floor of a closet in the house. I

stuck it in my arm, withdrew blood, and then shot it back in again. I hoped an air bubble would travel to my heart."

Back home, Jean prayed as she paced back and forth, waiting for the phone to ring. She instinctively knew that Karyn would call that night, and she was ready. She and Roy had been shuttling to and from Florida during Sandi's first weeks in Straight, going through parent orientation. They were scheduled for their last weekend. Impressed with the program and Sandi's progress, Jean convinced Roy that Karyn, too, deserved one last chance.

When the phone rang, Jean took a deep breath. "Karyn, Sandi's in a drug-rehab center in Florida. We're going to visit her this weekend. If you can get away, why don't you join us there?" she said as nonchalantly as possible. "You can visit with Sandi, and I'll bring some clean clothes you can take back to California with you."

"I'll think about it and call you back," replied Karyn. Her words were slurred and she'd dropped the phone.

How much more time does she have? Jean wondered as she knitted a scarf late into that night. She knew parents whose sons and daughters had been returned to them in coffins with an envelope of personal belongings. Drugs were such arbitrary killers.

When Karyn called back to tell her mother she'd meet them in Florida, Jean's heart didn't leap for joy; she just kept knitting quietly. A family can fall to pieces so quickly, she thought, and sometimes you can never patch it up again. Jean hoped she could pull her daughter back from the precipice on which she stood.

"Oh, my God!" gasped Jean when Karyn got off the plane at the Tampa airport. She looked like a skeleton. She'd lost twenty pounds, and dark circles shadowed her eyes. She wore threadbare jeans and plastic heels. Her bleached hair was a mess. Roy, satisfied that his daughter was on the plane, turned and went back to the car. Jean embraced her daughter warmly, feeling her ribs protruding from under her skimpy top. Then she grabbed her daughter's hand and held it tightly until they reached the motel. If I let go, Jean thought, I'll lose her forever.

The next morning Karyn was signed into Straight. When Jean came into the room to say good-bye to her daughter, Karyn indignantly said, "You lied to me!" Her mother smiled at the irony and gave her daughter the scarf she had knitted for her. "The nights can be cool." As she watched her daughter go through the doors, Jean leaned on Roy's shoulder and cried with relief and hope

for the first time in four long, battle-scarred years.

"I felt like a wild animal in a cage at Straight. I punched and kicked and screamed, but they told me that even if I ran away, they could get a court order to force me back into the program. The first couple of days, you're not allowed to say anything in group. You have to listen to other kids talk about their loneliness and their problems with drugs. I realized that I wasn't alone. For the first time I could share my feelings. After three months, I was standing up in front of the group, and the director asked me, 'How do you feel about what you've done?' And I stood there, silent. I thought about all the pain I'd caused and all the hurt I felt, and I didn't know what to say. He asked again. And all of a sudden I was hit with these emotions and feelings, and I just started crying. I cried for what seemed like hours, wave upon wave of sobs. See, I never forgave myself for anything until that moment. I was dead inside. Now I was beginning to see something green and alive within me. Then, at another group session with parents present, they passed around the microphone and my father asked me to forgive him and then he told me that he forgave me and that he loved me. 'I love you, too, Dad and Mom,' I said, and I felt beautiful and worth something, really worth something."

It's been two years since Karyn and Sandi went into the Straight drug-rehabilitation program. The Richweins live in Glenwood, Maryland, now. They have left in Ellicott City the memories that are painful to recall even now. Karyn and Sandi graduated from the program after fifteen months. Today, the girls, who still live at home, are pulling top grades at a local community college and are active in church and community affairs. But the turnaround has not been easy, and it has involved every member of the Richwein family.

Officials at Straight made it clear that nothing less than a total family commitment was required for the program to work. Consequently, while the girls were confronting their own problems, Roy, Jean, Dianne and Wendy were individually and then collectively involved in a complementary family program. The rap sessions, which took place at Straight (the organization now has a branch in nearby Virginia) and at the Richwein home, have continued each week since then.

"The most difficult thing for us to do, especially for me," says Roy, "has been to get in touch with our feelings after

repressing them for so long. We were so rigid, which is common among families with drug problems. I always thought that being open, or admitting that I was wrong, was a sign of weakness."

In the long talks he has since had with his daughters, Roy says he was stunned to discover that all through the harrowing experience, Karyn never forgot that the one time she knew that her father loved her was when he cried with her after the overdose at school when she was fourteen. "She carried this memory like some weather-beaten memento. I've since learned that sharing your feelings is the only way to show somebody that you really care. Children shouldn't have to grab desperately at brief glimpses of love from their parents," he says emotionally.

"It takes humility to admit you're powerless to deal with this problem alone," adds Jean. "I always thought I could control the problem. Then when we went to Straight, I balked at the idea that we, the family, were sick." Jean winces. "It's hard to hear that I sometimes did and sometimes may be doing things that are not in the best interests of my family. But I've learned not to be threatened if my family knows that I'm not perfect, just human."

Jean says her desire for everything to be perfect led her to cover up and to deny what was happening for so long. She says that her biggest blunder was to assume the responsibility for Karyn and Sandi's mistakes. "They never had to accept the consequences of their drug-taking," says Jean. "I did. If chores didn't get done and Roy was due home, I'd do them just to keep peace in the family. Of course I resented it, but I'd vent my frustration on Roy, not the girls. The most important lesson we've learned is that your child must accept responsibility for what he or she is doing, not only to herself, but to the whole family, and not only accept responsibility, but do something about it."

Looking younger than her nineteen years in a pink cashmere sweater and gray pleated skirt, Sandi admits that for a long time, she blamed everybody but herself for her problems. When she realized that she was doing drugs because *she* chose to do so, not because of her sister, or because her life was so terrible, she was able to grow beyond her bitterness and anger.

Sandi believes that the biggest mistake her parents made during her bout with drugs was to underestimate the girls' resourcefulness in keeping the truth from them. "We could play them against each other," she observes. "When they started acting as a team,

then we knew we couldn't get around that, so we ran away."

For Karyn, now twenty, accepting responsibility for what she did to her family took a long time, and the process still continues. Dressed in jeans and a sweater decorated with hearts, which she would have scorned in her drug phase, she speaks haltingly of the brutal experience that still haunts her.

She says that she regrets having irrevocably lost a whole chunk of her life to drugs. She is sorry she missed out on simple things, like her senior prom and having a girlfriend she could trust. And she has regrets about more serious matters as well, such as turning other people on to drugs.

She acknowledges that staying straight is not easy, because drugs have such a glamorous image in American culture. "It's easy to glamorize my past," she says, "but I've just got to remember the terrible feelings of worthlessness and self-hate, and I know I never want to go back to that."

Wendy and Dianne, now thirteen and fifteen, realize more than most kids their age the damage that drugs can inflict on a family. "I used to feel cheated," remembers Dianne. "I was frightened of my sisters and thought our family would never get together again. Now I think we're closer than other families because we talk a lot about how we feel."

"When kids at school talk about how cool drugs are," says Wendy, "I tell them that I don't think it's so great. It's not easy, and sometimes I chicken out and don't say anything, but I know what can happen."

For the Richweins, awareness is the safety net. "I don't think that short of keeping a twenty-four-hour watch you can prevent your child from doing drugs," says Jean, "but a parent can be better informed, more aware. Today we draw strength and courage from one another to meet the challenge of being honest and open."

The Richweins' commitment to continued growth as a family and the fight against drugs is a contract that is renewed every day. Jean and Roy believe that the worst is behind them, but they take nothing for granted. Each evening, as the family sits down to supper, everybody links hands and gives thanks, forming a family circle that is fragile yet beautiful. **End**

Note: All names other than those of the Richwein family have been changed.

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