

Praise for *Will I Ever Be Good Enough?*

“Readable book. . . . Provocative . . . recommended for psychology and mental health collections, where it may be useful for self-help and encouragement. . . . [A] guide to halting this insidious form of mental abuse and neglect.”

—*Library Journal*

“McBride presents specific steps toward recovery that daughters of any age can use as they grieve for the love and support they didn’t receive. . . . The author provides parenting tips as well as advice for maintaining healthy love relationships and friendships. . . . An excellent bibliography rounds out this revealing book, which ends on a hopeful and pragmatic note.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“*Will I Ever Be Good Enough?* illuminates a very common and unnamed wound—the wound that results from growing up with a narcissistic mother. In this engaging book, Karyl McBride provides a clear, honest, and effective way to heal this wound and live life fully and joyfully.”

—Christiane Northrup, M.D., author of *Mother-Daughter Wisdom*, *The Wisdom of Menopause*, and *Women’s Bodies, Women’s Wisdom*

“Narcissistic mothers are always there when they need you. They expect to be the center of attention, and they can be cruel if they don’t get what they want. Learning how to set boundaries with narcissistic mothers is a complex challenge. Dr. McBride offers a step-by-step approach to understanding narcissism, setting limits on the abuse, and recovering from the psychological damage. This book is a ‘must-read’ for every woman living in the shadow of a domineering, self-focused parent.”

—Nanette Gartrell, M.D., author of *My Answer Is NO . . . If That’s Okay with You: How Women Can Say NO and (Still) Feel Good About It*

“The long-term destructive consequences that narcissistic parents have for their children are well known. Until now, however, there has been little in the way of helpful advice for those who were raised by these parents. In this insightful new book, Dr. McBride presents a detailed examination of narcissistic mothers and the harmful effects on their daughters. She also offers practical, step-by-step guidance for working through these issues. This book is a terrific resource for those women raised by narcissistic mothers and looking for strategies for change.”

—W. Keith Campbell, Ph.D., author of *When You Love a Man Who Loves Himself*

“*Will I Ever Be Good Enough?* is an amazing journey out of pain. Providing true professional guidance and clarity, Dr. Karyl McBride heaps in genuine love and kindness. This book is like having an ideal therapist at your convenience who really helps you heal self-doubt and self-rejection. Every page is milk and honey to your soul.”

—Tama J. Kieves, author of *This Time I Dance! Trusting the Journey of Creating the Work You Love (How One Harvard Lawyer Left It All to Have It All!)*

“Excellent clinical information about the effects of narcissistic mothers on their daughters, written clearly for all women struggling with this issue. The recovery section offers a rich variety of ideas and techniques to use in everyday life.”

—Linda Vaughan, M.A., Licensed Professional Counselor

“Dr. McBride has broken new and exceptionally important ground in exploring a critical area in parenting. This book is must reading for both the professional and the layperson who want to understand and successfully address the lifelong and potentially devastating impact of narcissistic maternal child rearing. It is filled with useful information and recommendations presented in a readable form.”

—David N. Bolocofsky, J.D., Ph.D., family law attorney
and former psychology professor

“Dr. McBride does a beautiful job of describing the many faces of narcissism. I found this book extremely engaging and easy to read, and yet it is also highly informative, practical, and structured in its treatment approach. This is a must-read for anyone dealing with a loved one who is narcissistic.”

—Renee Richker, M.D., child and adolescent psychiatrist

“[C]omes across with such richness and authenticity that this book should be on every family therapist’s shelf. It is written for the daughters, not for clinicians per se; however, both the daughters and their mental health professionals can benefit from the information presented in this volume. . . . Practical, insightful, and full of compassion, it is likely to help many women in ways that few other resources are able to do. [D]aughters of mothers with borderline, antisocial, and histrionic traits are likely to benefit from its caring, empathy, and practicality just as much as daughters of narcissistic mothers. . . . [T]his book is a gem . . . it truly helps the reader to reflect on her pain, as well as relish the hope that she can end the legacy of narcissism.”

—Farrah M. Hughes, Ph.D., for *The Family Psychologist*,
newsletter of the Society for Family Psychology, division
43 of the American Psychological Association



WILL I EVER BE GOOD ENOUGH?

HEALING THE DAUGHTERS OF
NARCISSISTIC MOTHERS

KARYL McBRIDE, PH.D.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The examples, anecdotes, and characters in this book are drawn from my clinical work, research, and life experience with real people and events. Names and some identifying features and details have been changed, and in some instances people or situations are composites.



*Dedicated to five people who
taught me the essence of unconditional love:*

Nathan Scott
Meggan Marie
McKenzie Irene
Isabella Grace
Flora Teresa





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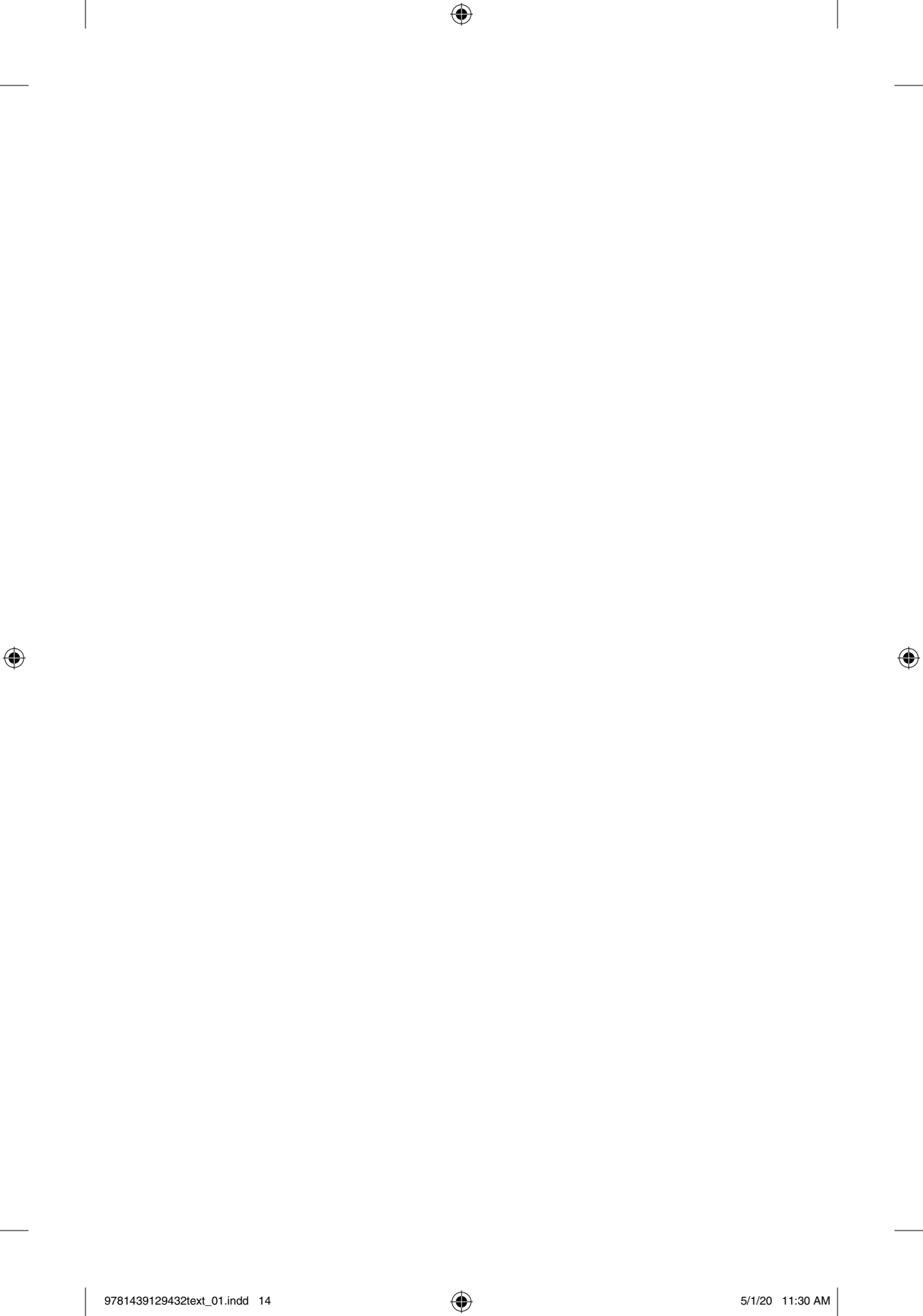
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INTRODUCTION

Our relationship with Mother is birthed simultaneously with our entry into the world. We take our first breath of life, and display the initial dependent, human longing for protection and love in her presence. We are as one in the womb and on the birthing table. This woman, our mother . . . all that she is and is not . . . has given us life. Our connection with her in this instant and from this point forward carries with it tremendous psychological weight for our lifelong well-being. Oddly, I have never wanted to believe this.

First, being a feminist-era mom myself, I didn't want mothers and women to bear so much responsibility or ultimate blame if things go wrong. Certainly many factors other than mothering shape a child's life. Second, I didn't want to face how feeling like an unmothered child had such a devastating effect on me and my life. To acknowledge this meant I had to face it.

While doing research over the years, I have read many books that discuss the mother-daughter bond. Each time I read a different volume, unexpected tears would stream down my cheeks. For I could not recall attachment, closeness, memories of the scent of Mother's perfume, the feel of her skin, the sound of her voice singing in the kitchen, the solace of her rocking, holding and comforting, the intellectual stimulation and joy of being read to.

I knew this was not natural, but could not find a book that explained this lack. It made me feel somewhat crazy. Was I delusional, or just a chick with a poor memory? I could not find a book that explained that this phenomenon of feeling unmothered could be a real

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deal and that there could be mothers who are not maternal. Nor could I find a book that discussed the conflicted feelings that their daughters have about these mothers, the frustrated love, and even sometimes the hatred. Because good girls aren't supposed to hate their mothers, they don't talk about these bad feelings. Motherhood is a sacred institution in most cultures and therefore is generally not discussed in a negative light. When I decided to write a book on mothers who don't mother their daughters, and the pain this causes girls and adult daughters, I felt as if I were breaking a taboo.

Reading books about the mother-daughter bond always gave me the sensation of a deep loss and the fear that I was alone in this suffering. Experts wrote of the complexity of the mother-daughter connection, how it is rife with conflict and ambivalence, but I felt something different—a void, a lack of empathy and interest, and a lack of feeling loved. For many years, I did not understand and tried to rationalize it. Other members of the family and well-intentioned therapists explained it away with various excuses. Like a good girl, I tried to make excuses and take all the blame. It was not until I began to understand that the emotional void was a characteristic result of maternal narcissism that the pieces began to fit together. The more I learned about maternal narcissism, the more my experience, my sadness, and my lack of memory made sense. This understanding was the key to my beginning to recover my own sense of identity, apart from my mother. I became more centered, taking up what I now call substantial space, no longer invisible (even to myself) and not having to make myself up as I go along. Without understanding, we flail around, we make mistakes, feel deep unworthiness, and sabotage ourselves and our lives.

Writing this book has been a culmination of years of research and a soul journey that took me back to when I was a little girl who knew something was wrong, feeling that the absence of nurturing was not normal, but not knowing why. I am writing this book now in the hopes that I can help other women understand that those feelings were and are not their fault.

This does not mean that I want you to blame your mother. This is

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not a journey of projected anger, resentment, or rage, but one of understanding. We want to heal ourselves and we have to do that with love and forgiveness for ourselves and our mothers. I do not believe in creating victims. We are accountable for our own lives and feelings. To be healthy, we first have to understand what we experienced as daughters of narcissistic mothers, and then we can move forward in recovery to make things the way they need to be for us. Without understanding our mothers and what their narcissism did to us, it is impossible to recover. We have been taught to repress and deny, but we have to face the truth of our experiences—that our longing for a maternal warmth and mothering is not going to be fulfilled and our wishing and hoping that things will be different are not going to change things. As girls, we were programmed to look at the dynamics of the family in a positive light, even though we knew we lived under a shadow. Our families usually did look good to outsiders, but though we sensed something was wrong, we were told that really “it is nothing.” This kind of emotional environment and dishonesty can be crazy-making. Smile, be pretty, and act like everything’s good. Sound familiar?

I am still amazed whenever I talk to other daughters of narcissistic mothers at the similarities of our internal emotional landscapes. We may have different lifestyles and outward appearances for the world to see, but inside, we wave the same emotional banners. My greatest hope is that this book will offer you acknowledgment and validation for your profound emotions and allow you to feel whole, healthy, and authentic in who you are today.

In writing this book, I had to fight many internal battles. First, I had to trust my ability to do it, as I am a therapist, not a writer. Second, and of more interest, I had to talk to my mother about it. When I brought it up with Mother, I said to her, “Hey, Mom, I need your help. I am writing a book about mothers and daughters and I need your input, suggestions, and permission to use some personal material.” My mother, bless her heart, said, “Why don’t you write a book about fathers?” And of course, she was worried about being a bad

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mother, which would be expected. She was able to give me her blessing, however, and I think it is because she was trying to understand that this is not a book about blame, but a book about healing. I have to admit I wanted her to say many things like: “Are there some things we need to discuss or work on together?” “Do you have pain from your childhood?” “Is there anything we can do about it now?” “Can we heal together?” None of this happened, but after all these years of my own recovery work, I knew not to expect her to be able to do this empathic inquiry. I was grateful that I had mustered the nerve to broach the book to her, which admittedly took me some time to do. At one time in my life, this exchange would have been unthinkable.

Somehow, after taking this risk, I found it easier to move forward and be authentic in talking about my own experience as well as about my research. Although it would have felt emotionally safe to write at arm’s length from a purely clinical perspective, I hope that my own stories of being a daughter of a narcissistic mother will help you know that I do understand. I have been there.

I’ve divided the book into three parts that parallel my approach to psychotherapy. Part 1 explains the problem of maternal narcissism. Part 2 shows the impact of the problem, its many effects, and how it plays out in daughters’ lifestyles. Part 3 is a road map for recovery.

I invite you now to come with me to learn about yourself and your mother. It won’t always be a comfortable and easy trip. You’ll be emerging from denial, confronting difficult feelings, being vulnerable, and facing characteristics of your own that you may not like. It is an emotional undertaking. Sometimes you will find it funny. Other times you will feel a great sadness as you try to understand what you experienced and heal from it. By doing so, you will change the legacy of distorted maternal love and make a lasting difference for your daughters, sons, and grandchildren. As you face the honest reflections of your life patterns, you will ultimately like yourself more and become better at parenting, in relationships, and in everything else in your life.

Emotional legacies are like genetic legacies; they pass along to

— xx —

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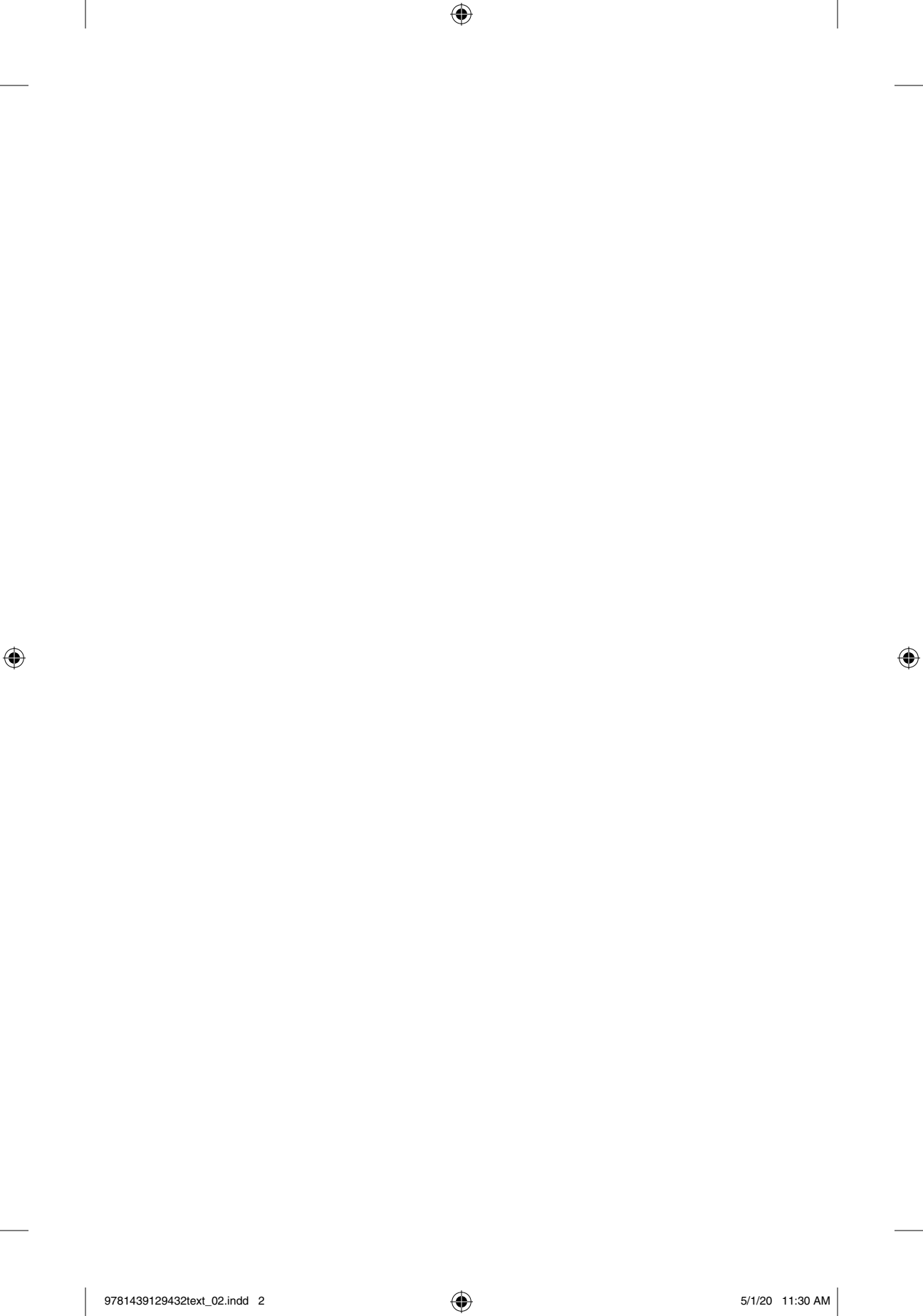
each generation without anyone really taking a lot of notice. Some of the “hand me downs” are endearing and wonderful and we feel grateful and proud, but some are heartbreaking and destructive. They need to be stopped. We need to stop them. Having done my own recovery work from my distorted maternal legacy, I can say that I’ve been there and I can help you change yours too.

I welcome you to read further with me. Sit with me, talk with me, cry with me, laugh with me. Together we will begin to deal with the reality of your emotional legacy. Even if it’s always been “all about Mom,” it’s your turn now. It gets to be about you, the “you” that maybe you’ve never discovered or didn’t even know existed.



PART ONE

RECOGNIZING THE PROBLEM



THE EMOTIONAL BURDEN YOU CARRY

There was a little girl who had a little curl right in the middle of her forehead and when she was good she was criticized anyway.

—Elan Golomb, Ph.D., *Trapped in the Mirror*¹

For many years, wherever I went, I was accompanied by a gang of harsh critics who made my life almost unbearable. No matter what I tried to accomplish, they were always there reminding me that I wasn't up to the task and could never do a good enough job. If I was in the midst of spring-cleaning or working hard on a home improvement project, they screamed at me, "This house will never be what you want it to be." While I was exercising, they would nag, "It doesn't matter how hard you try; your body is falling apart, and you're a wimp. Can't you lift more weights than that?" I'd make financial decisions, and they would bark at me, "You were always a moron at math, and now you're a mess at finances!" My internal critics were particularly nasty when it came to my relationships with men, whispering things like "Can't you see you're a loser? You always pick the wrong men. Why don't you just give up?" And most hurtful of all, when I was having problems with my children, they would stridently announce, "Your life choices have harmed your children; you should be ashamed of yourself!"

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These incessantly disapproving voices never gave me a moment's peace. They harangued, nagged, and demeaned me with the overall message that no matter how hard I tried, I could never succeed, could never be good enough. They created such an extreme sensitivity in me that I constantly assumed others were judging me as critically as I was judging myself.

Finally I realized that these "critics" were destroying me emotionally, and I made a decision to annihilate them—it was a question of my very survival. Fortunately, my decision led to my recovery, as well as my research, clinical work, and the writing of this book.

After I decided that the inner critics had to go, my first order of business was to figure out where they had originated. As a psychotherapist, I figured they were probably connected to my family history, but my background didn't seem problematic. My family touted a sturdy Dutch, German, Norwegian, and Swedish heritage with a solid work ethic with no overly mean personalities or apparent child abuse. My self-protecting denial reminded me that I had grown up with a roof over my head, clothes to wear, food to eat. So what was my problem? I promised myself I would find out.

Why Am I So Unsure of Myself?

For 28 years I had conducted psychotherapy with hundreds of women and families, which provided me with clinical experience to draw from as I sought to unravel my own internal mystery. I had treated scores of women who shared many of the same symptoms I was finally recognizing within myself: oversensitivity, indecisiveness, self-consciousness, lack of self-trust, inability to succeed in relationships, lack of confidence regardless of our accomplishments, and a general sense of insecurity. Some of my clients had spent unproductive years in therapy with other practitioners, or had purchased stacks of self-help books that never seemed to pinpoint what was causing their pain. My clients ranged from high-powered, successful professionals and CEOs to stay-at-home soccer moms to drug-addicted mothers on

welfare to public figures. Like me, my clients had always felt that they lacked something crucial in their lives that seemed to be connected to the distorted self-image and insecurity that haunted their adult lives. Like me, they felt they were never good enough:

- “I’m always second-guessing myself. I replay a conversation repeatedly, wondering how I could have handled it differently or just to bask in my shame. Most of the time I realize there is no logical reason for me to feel embarrassed, but I still feel that way. I’m really anxious about what other people think of me” (Jean, 54).
- “People often compliment me on my accomplishments—my master’s degree in communications, my successful public relations career, the children’s book I wrote—but I can’t seem to allow myself the credit I probably deserve. Instead, I beat myself up for what I think I’ve done poorly or should have done better. I’m such a cheerleader for my friends; why can’t I be that way for myself?” (Evelyn, 35).
- “When I die, I’ve told my husband he can carve my tombstone with, ‘She tried, she tried, she tried, she tried, and then she died’ ” (Susan, 62).

After years of study and clinical work, I began to see that the debilitating symptoms I shared with so many of my female clients had their origin in a psychological problem called narcissism—specifically, our mothers’ narcissism. Much of what I had read regarding narcissism pertained to men, but when I looked at descriptions of it, something clicked. I realized that there are mothers who are so emotionally needy and self-absorbed that they are unable to give unconditional love and emotional support to their daughters. I saw that my clients’ troubled relationships with their mothers, as well as my own relationship with mine, were clearly connected to maternal narcissism.