

# THE SECRET THAT BECAME MY LIFE

When my husband's secret became my own, I learned the slow torment (and occasional titillation) of the secret keeper. In maintaining our decades-long deception, I grew to understand—and ultimately overcome—the identity-warping nature of secrets and lies.

BY JANE ISAY ■ PHOTOGRAPHS BY SEBASTIAN SCHRAMM

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Discovering that someone you love has lied to you and kept a secret feels like being hit by a bolt of lightning. Such is the circumstance of the finder, the person to whom the truth is revealed. The arc of your life is altered in an instant. Suddenly the present makes no sense and the future is impossible to picture.

I lived as both a secret finder and a secret keeper for much of the last half century. My story is about thunderbolts and denial. It's about the power that secrets have to attract and to repel. It's about the damage we suffer when we hide the truth.

When I first met Dick in 1959, he was a tall, handsome psychiatrist resident at Yale; he was lovely, fun, kind, smart, a man with a quirky sense of humor and a serious reader. At my parents' urging, I had recently broken off an engagement with a medical school dropout, whom I had adored. After the intensity of that relationship, I appreciated Dick's coolness. He would drive to New York, and I would visit him in New Haven. We always had a good time at dinner or the theater. Yet there was something mysterious about him; he would retreat from intimacy in a way that piqued my interest; he was a true gentleman.

We married and I moved to New Haven. I got a job at the Yale University Press, and he finished his residency. The most important part of his day was his psychoanalytic session. I grew up in a family where everybody was in analysis (but me). Dick went six days a week, every week of the year; he was utterly serious about his analysis. It was exciting to be young marrieds in New Haven; Dick was forging a career in psychoanalysis, I was a young

editor, and we had our first baby. The senior Freudian psychoanalysts adopted us—Dick was their favorite and I might be their editor. We loved our life. Sometimes at lectures or pompous dinners we couldn't even look at each other, lest we erupt in giggles. We'd snuggle in bed talking over the silly and the intriguing; I would rest my head against his armpit. Sex was not a big part of our relationship. It didn't seem to matter. We were a great team. I loved him, he loved me.

When we tried to get pregnant the second time, things were not easy. We would start out fine, but then something would turn Dick off and he would go to sleep. Why wasn't Dick attracted to me? Was I too fat? Was I too busty? Maybe it was my pushy personality.

Eventually we did conceive our second son, and that pretty much ended our sex life. Dick reassured me, as a psychoanalyst, that people who were married more than a few years rarely made love. I believed him.

By the time our little one was 4, we had been married nearly nine years and Dick finished his psychoanalysis. Things began to change. He was involved in his work, I in mine, and we were so busy with the boys that we were no longer so close. We both were too distracted to worry. I had an affair at the time Dick ended his analysis. Knowing that a man found me sexually attractive reaffirmed a part of me, but it didn't mean as much as my marriage did. Then my career at Yale blew up. Dick was supportive and encouraged me to take a job in New York, even though it meant a two-hour commute each way. It was a

## THE LITTLE DETECTIVE

In the absence of honest disclosure, children may twist facts into scenarios more dire than the truth.

**THERE IS A** type of child I call the "little detective." When something is off kilter, these children need to find out what's happening, and they often do find clues that lead them closer to the truth. Being a little detective has an effect on the way these people handle difficult realities, the raw material of secrets, for the rest of their lives. Brian\* was 12 when his father died—ostensibly of pneumonia—several months after his parents separated in the 1960s. On the following Sunday, Brian was in the kitchen when the phone rang; it was his aunt asking for his mom. "My mother ushered me out of the kitchen," she closed the door, but he put his ear to the keyhole.

\*Name and identity have been changed.

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He heard the words "hospital" and "pills," and he realized that his father had not died of pneumonia—he had committed suicide. What Brian surmised that day was never discussed at home. When he brought up the subject, nobody would talk with him.

Children blame themselves for family misfortunes like divorce or illness, largely because of the "egocentric fallacy." "If I make a fuss over something I need, I'll get it" translates into "If something bad happens, it must be because of me." It's important for adults to help children understand, as they grow up, that they are not responsible for things over which they have no control—also, thoughts don't cause events. Important people in Brian's life began to disappear. His dad's best friend, who had painted a portrait of his father, came to reclaim it. "He showed up a week after my dad died, handed me a football, and took the portrait," Brian recalls. He never saw him

again. Then his uncle, his father's brother, stopped coming by. "I had been close to my uncle, and I felt betrayed when he disappeared." Some years after his father's death, Brian mentioned to his mother how he missed his smart, funny, handsome, loving dad. His mother said, "You think he was so nice? He had an affair with so-and-so, he did this, he did that."

Gradually, the real story emerged: "It was kept secret that my dad was mentally ill," Brian also learned why so many people disappeared from his life after his father's death. They blamed his mother for the suicide. She had thrown him out of the house, and he landed in the hospital, depressed and hopeless. Brian did find someone to talk to: Grandma. "She and I talked about my dad's suicide all the time." But it wasn't until she was 96 that the whole truth emerged. "Your dad wrote a letter to your mother," his grandmother told Brian. In the letter, his father

spelled out everything he had done; he apologized and begged for forgiveness. But Grandma confessed that she had torn that letter up. She had decided to protect her son's reputation, and that may have cost him his life.

The shock of this revelation still gives Brian chills. But his relationship with his grandmother and the intimacy of their many conversations sustained both of them throughout their lives. Shared secrets and intimacy are twins. Brian's intimacy with his grandmother could not be severed by that last terrible revelation. There is a particular advantage for those who decide to be honest with children. Since we all fill in the blanks according to what we already believe about the world, and since teenagers still have an incomplete understanding of adult behavior, truthful conversations give parents the opportunity to offer their point of view, preventing a destructive one from taking root.

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rough time. Dick held the fort with two small sons, and we were exhausted. During this period, I noticed changes in Dick's behavior. He started taking long walks in the evening. On vacations he didn't stay with me in the hotel after dinner—more walks. Odd stories about his trips emerged. I was confused. Secrets close doors between people. The secret keeper has to skirt important subjects and becomes silent when the conversation gets too close. Meanwhile, the other person lives in a state of ignorance.

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You can't know what you don't know; all you can do is sense that something is awry. I confided in my friend. She agreed that he was distracted, like a fugitive at the dinner table. She suggested that I reassure him: Whatever his secret, I could take it, and I still loved him.

"You're what?" "All the years in my analysis we tried to cure me, but it didn't work," he explained.

Telling is not simple for secret keepers who have dedicated much time and energy to the secret. It is painful and humiliating to explain feelings and motives under these circumstances. Even if they believe that they kept the secret for good reasons, they feel guilty. Faced with a loved one wanting the truth, people tend to pull back. Yet an honest account of the circumstances that led to the secret is often necessary to begin the process of healing.

Dick went on to tell me of trips to gay movie houses and risky episodes in men's rooms. His friends in the Gay Caucus had urged him to come clean to me that night. Everything that I had built my life for was in ruins. What about our future? How could we survive this?

I took my friend's advice and reassured Dick of my love, but I was scared. So was Dick. We couldn't figure out our future. The Freudian circles where Dick was a star were severely homophobic; he couldn't come out as a gay man. He didn't want to give up his family, and he loved me. I didn't want to give him up, or the family, or our place in society, or our financial security.

By the time we were back in New York, we were

clear: We would stay married, he would stay in the closet. I would accept his absences. The boys, then 8 and 12, were not to be told, and neither was anybody else. We had built too much together. We could adjust—especially me.

We all have the unique ability to narrate our experiences—to ourselves. We are constantly processing and shaping the information that comes to our brains from our bodies and our senses. We organize all that input into narratives, which form the backbone of our identity. Some of them are about the past, others are about the present, and we use that same technique to imagine

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the future. In this way we can massage the chaos of our lives and transform it into our stories. The continuous conversation, much of which is unconscious, allows us to eliminate dangerous options. It helps us imagine survival strategies and even make good risk-taking decisions. These narratives are not immutable—they change as our experiences change—but they are fundamental. You have to reassemble your identity in a way that accounts for the new information.

What had been Dick's secret, from the time he was 8 years old, became mine. In 24 hours, I went from some-

## THE SECRET REVELATION

A terrible revelation about one parent may shed positive light on another.

**EUGENE\* GREW UP** in an old Victorian house; the attic was piled with cartons, packages, and castoffs. One afternoon in the 1970s, he found newspapers from World War II there; his father's name was on the front page. The article reported the story of Eugene's father, a prominent physician, who was divorcing his wife, a Frenchwoman. She had abandoned her husband and taken their children to North Africa, where she was living with a German general.

Eugene was shocked and scared. "I couldn't believe it. I felt sick." He didn't have the courage to confront his distant and formal parents. That weekend a friend of his father's came by, and Eugene

asked him what he knew of the story. The friend said, "I think you'd better talk to your father."

Not long after, Eugene and his father went on a train excursion. On the trip, his father told the story of his first wife, his children, his divorce, and his marriage to Eugene's mother. In the 1930s, Eugene's father, who was practicing medicine in France, had fallen in love with and married his first wife, and they had twins. As the German invasion loomed, Eugene's father decided to take his family to America.

He had acquired passage to New York for the family and had set a time for his wife to bring the children to the wharf. They never appeared. At the time, the marriage was rocky, and Eugene's father assumed she didn't want to accompany him. After that, his father heard only rumors: She had attached herself to a German general; she had slept her way through North Africa.

At the end of the excursion, his

father said, "I will never speak to you about this again."

So Eugene went to his mother, who said, "I can't speak about this." He returned to the attic, but all the cartons had been removed.

Some eight years later, when his father passed away, Eugene received a letter from his half-brother, François. In the 1990s, his French brother came to visit. He explained that his parents' marriage had been falling apart in the late 1930s. "My father abandoned us. He had long wanted to be rid of my mother—he hated her." On the eve of the German invasion, his father had boarded a ship bound for America, alone. François's mother, a daughter of a French military family, fled south. She lived in North Africa under the protection of the Vichy authorities. She never took up with a German officer, and she struggled to raise the twins until the war was over. They returned to Paris, where her family cared for them. Eugene's

parents did try to gain custody of the twins, but to no avail. Eugene also learned that his mother secretly mailed the children boxes of food, photographs, and money during the war. François relayed his gratitude for her generosity.

The ambiguity of Eugene's family history was impossible for him to bear. So he has come to a conclusion about his father. "My father should never have been a father; he wasn't a good one." He has chosen to adopt a terrible truth, in place of a lie. As for his mother, Eugene discovered a demeanor throughout her life was cold and demanding. It would have been beyond Eugene's imagination to think of his traitor mother secretly sending food packages and money to her husband's former family in Paris. He could not fathom her going behind his back. The sorrow of recognizing the truth about his father has been mitigated by the warmth of discovering his mother's depths.

\*Name and identity have been changed.

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one from whom a secret had been kept to a full-fledged secret keeper. The revelation and its aftermath actually brought us closer. The intimacy of a shared secret like ours is hard to equal—except perhaps the intimacy of a real marriage, but I didn't know what that looked like.

Many wives, faced with such a revelation, are furious, hurt, and feel deceived, so they kick their gay husbands out. Why didn't I have that response? I loved the façade we had built of a perfect family; and I couldn't bear to crack it apart. I didn't want to change my life. Once we make a decision, wise or foolish, we like to think it was a good one. If new information contradicts that belief, we experience cognitive dissonance, which is painful. So we unconsciously ignore the new information, shaping our reality instead to fit our sense of who we are. One element in the theory of cognitive dissonance is especially pertinent to marriages, good or bad, true or faithless: the commitment factor. If you work hard for something, you want to keep it and think it is wonderful. Besides, I had come to believe that I didn't deserve more.

Lonely as a child, I always kept my own counsel; I knew how to deal with unfairness and the difficulties strong personalities brought me. So I was ready to compromise. Now that we had a shared—and very important—secret to keep, our partnership was revitalized. I didn't understand then what it was going to cost me. What may start as a simple set of secrets can spread through a person's character like a cancer. Keeping a secret demands habitual denial, which gradually may morph into self-deception, resulting in the diminution of the self. Our discomfort with cognitive dissonance enables us to rationalize our decisions, right or wrong.

## THE LOVE CHILD

The search for the truth may also be a path to reconciliation.

**MARIA\* WAS 17** when she fell in love with a young man from the wrong side of the tracks; her parents were outraged, and her father kicked her out. "My daughter is dead," he shouted, slamming the front door on her. Maria took her exile to heart; she moved away and didn't even attend her mother's funeral. Three decades later, in the 1990s, her aunt implored her to come home and visit her 81-year-old father. The homecoming was warmer than she'd expected, despite her discovery that her father had never received the birthday presents she had sent him—her mother had intercepted each one. It was only after his wife's death that her father sought to reconnect.

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While looking through snapshots and photo albums, he leaned back and said, "I can't tell you how much I love you; I couldn't have loved you any more if you were my own daughter."

His English was not spectacular; Maria thought, maybe he meant flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood. "What exactly do you mean?" "You didn't know you were adopted?"

Dead silence. The next day, when she brought this revelation up, he denied ever having said it. Her three aunts lived in the house next door. Each aunt had a floor, so Maria went up the stairs, seeking information. None of them would divulge a thing. One aunt replied: "Your father's a senile old man. He doesn't know what he's talking about."

Next, she went to her favorite cousin, who shook her head. "I am not allowed to speak of that." She then reached out to her

childhood friends.

"Are you sitting down?" one friend asked. "Your parents, Sal and Celia, had two boys; all of a sudden there's this little toddler; and everyone acted like she'd been there all the time, so we all acted like she had been there all the time."

Maria now knew this much. "I was dropped, *deus ex machina*, and everyone acted like she'd been there all the time, so we all acted like she had been there all the time." Finally, through a social worker, she got the name of her birth mother; she was no stranger, but an aunt who'd left town years before. Maria called the "aunt who turned out to be my mother."

"Little girl," the woman said, "I ain't your mama. Your mama lived over there in East Baltimore. Your mama died in Baltimore, and that's the only mama you ever had. Don't you be telling my husband nothing about you being my child, because you ain't my child. If you do, I've got a gun and I ain't afraid to use it."

Maria had discovered a story of the ages: An unmarried woman gets pregnant, and her sister raises the child. The explanation for the secrecy was self-evident: They were not about to parade their sister's shame in front of the neighborhood, but they wanted Maria to be a full member of their family, despite the fact that she landed in their house as a toddler. She also understood the bonds of loyalty and protectiveness that got her to Sal and Celia's house, and that the whole story was wrapped in family—her family.

Maria remembers how her parents sat with her on the steps of their brownstone, waiting for the bookmobile. She took the stack of books they handed her, and she read them all. This was her family, despite their not speaking for years, she belonged to them. The bombshell of her adoption, which could have further sundered her already tenuous family relationship, actually brought her home.

an actual happy home life. We both lied about Dick's absences—he was an important psychoanalyst, he had meetings to attend. The boys were not suspicious; teenagers have their own lives and their own secrets to keep. This was a lonely time for me. I threw myself into my career. People asked me how I had the energy to do all the things I did. "Recycled rage" was my answer. At the time I thought that my difficult mother was the source of my anger; it never dawned on me to be furious at Dick.

I was as isolated as a married woman with growing children, lots of friends, and a demanding career could

he told me that our older son had come across evidence of Dick's lover. Dick asked our son to come home, and we sat with him. He was shattered. "My whole life has been a lie," he said as he left the house. We didn't hear from our eldest for weeks, and I never got the chance to tell Dick that day how painful my life had become.

We told our second son when he came home for Christmas break. He seemed less upset. By the following June, I knew it was over for me. I asked Dick for a divorce.

We moved through that summer and into the fall, I told people my secret, and I survived. They didn't blame me; I had always blamed myself for not seeing Dick's true nature. Perhaps Dick could have confided his concerns to me when we were courting. I might still have married him—at that time many people believed that homosexuality could be cured by therapy. But I would have had a choice. And, more important, I would not have blamed myself for my husband's lack of attraction to me.

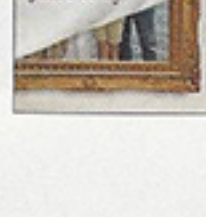
Our family of four celebrated my 50th birthday at a fine restaurant. It was as if nothing would change, even though everything was about to.

Today I recognize the pattern of deceit and denial that our family lived. I endured the shock of revelation and the terrible knowledge that my life was based on a lie and would never be the same. I quickly chose to reframe my scenario as one of love and family. That made the deceit palatable to me, and it still does. Dick endured over 40 years of hiding his true self from the people he loved. It diminished his self-worth to the detriment of his relationships. He had to be different people in different places, a job nobody would choose. Did we make the right choices? All I can report is that we grew apart and we grew together. Like weeds at the bottom of a lake, we remain deeply rooted in each other's lives.

Managing a secret is work. The secret stays alert; it's a full-time job. Truth brings relief—even though it is hard to bear, unpleasant to think about, and miserable to consider revealing. Sometimes we pay the price of truth when we look into the eyes of people we have disappointed. But we always imagined their disappointment—or we would not have kept our secret from the outset.

Some revelations trust relationships in their tracks. But others reveal the true person in our midst, the imperfect, limping, and often loving soul we cared about so much. And so we continue to care, and together we can rebuild, this time slowly, on a foundation of truth. We can build a house together, or a home, or a beautiful garden that is nourished by acceptance.

We have choices in this life, and we can make mistakes. Forgiveness is not impossible, and the wholeness of spirit that comes from truth is cool and pure. ■



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