

TRUTH TO TELL

Truth to Tell
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Tell No One

*~ Nothing weighs on us so heavily as a secret
~ Jean de la Fontaine*

There comes a time when children learn to keep secrets. Whether this is a good or questionable thing will be determined by the very nature of the secret.

I remember my mother reading Milly-Molly-Mandy stories to my sister, I listening on the fringes of the couch—it was a girl's book—and wondering at the goodness of young Milly. It confounded me that even in secret-keeping she validated her integrity, motivated to hide the truth in order to keep others ignorant of some kindness or pleasant thing she had prepared for them; never for naughty behaviour, willed or otherwise.

The thrill of surprising others with some benefit to them is most definitely a healthy and happy reason to keep a secret. There is no fear or sadness attached, no grievous consequence when discovered.

However, this was not my childhood experience. For myself, and most children I've known, secrets were a symptom of fear; a calculated decision to conceal what, most assuredly, would invite miserable penalty if discovered.

Fear of being found out is a sensation most, I assume,

can relate to. My earliest recollection of such emotion is as a boy of nine. I'd entered into the forbidden garden shed, the one with all my Dad's tools and other man-stuff; dark, musty and cobwebbed—a boy's paradise. Forbidden because it was dangerous and I'd get hurt or break something, so dad said. Never a truer word, though it was the magazines I found there that did more damage than any sharp point or blade have likely achieved. Dangerous on a level imperceptible to my child's heart. Yet it was that day, I think, that set me on such a path which now, forty-six years on, has me rueing the day I disobeyed my father.

Strangely, it was the broken glass jar in which my father kept his nails for which I feared being discovered; the pages I'd spent fascinated hours groping through seeming the lesser crime. So I'd hidden both jar and nails, and in my haste left the shed with the magazines opened on the floor. Dad never said a word. To this day I reflect on that. I guess he, too, feared being found out.

Regrettably the images seen that day remain imprinted on my eyelids, recalled at will; jarred open windows to my carnal nature that will not close. So also remains the strange panic at the sound of breaking glass.

Yet that was a beginning and, for all that it would lead to, an innocent one; not innocent in that I disobeyed my

father, but I speak of all the evil that would come into my life, and others, because of a new appetite. Quite normal in some aspects, but twisted by a hunger beyond my years and guided by a force opposed to anyone's best interests. That force whispered, "Tell no one". That my father kept his secret hidden was reinforcement enough that I, too, must keep my hunger closeted, locked away in the secret shed of my soul—but not to die.

I kept my secret inside, as had my father, as did others. Hungers, especially the dark ones, do not diminish when hidden. In fact I have a theory, that good and dark hungers are sustained and destroyed by quite opposite treatments. Whereas to advertise and reveal one would enliven it, so it would be an act of death to the other. Visa versa, to bottle and conceal the other would be like strangulation to the first. So in hiding my hunger, I fed it, and it became darker and stronger still.

Oh that I had confessed my actions then, as a child, when consequences would have yielded so light a sentence and plucked the dark seed from my heart before it had chance to fruit. Oh that the daunting weight of so many years never had opportunity to settle across me.

Now it is too late. For me to confess now? I tremble to think.

My name is Kerry Sutherland, fifty-five, happily married to the same woman for twenty-six of those years and the father of an adoring daughter. But for those last two truths I would not, possibly, be in the predicament I am, but, as Confucius say, *Can there be a love which does not make demands on its object?* And there is the rub, but not where my story begins.

I watched him grow from a young boy to the man, I being twenty-three when we first met; not that he would remember, being but a toddler of three. Little remained of the unsullied pre-shed boy in me, and few of my thoughts were innocent. Of course, had his mother known of the twisted nature of my passions, she never would have allowed me to move in, let alone mind her child. But as already said, mine was a dualistic life, one which I had become master at concealing. At some shallow level it could be said we were friends, if such can be based on mutual desperateness. I used her. Worse, I did so knowing she already grappled her own many and deep troubles; little did she know I had become one of them. Truth to tell I had no designs at the beginning, beyond making some needed money. She paid me to mind him.

It was my last year of university. The trio of campus-

life, free wireless broadband and the inner-city red-light district had indulged me full experience with much the world offered to sate my ever ravenous lusts. I should have guessed, I suppose, from the progressions already made—I call them perversions now—that taboos whether socio-cultural, religious or parental, were small defence against my longing. One-by-one they toppled before it.

For that whole year I babysat the boy, every Thursday and Friday.

His name was Jeff.

I do not think of myself as a paedophile, just as I did not think of myself as homosexual when with men, or an adulterer when with married women. There was only my lust and a ready and willing means to satisfy it — Except for Jeff.

My crimes against him became the catalyst to what I've come to call my pig-pen experience. Like the prodigal of the parable it was the contrast that drew me, comparing my once innocence to what I had become. I had committed one of societies worst imaginable acts. I was despicable, irredeemable, less than human; a swine with the pigswill of my life's course finally reaping its due. I remember feeling like an empty husk, eaten up and worthless.

With the utter desperateness of those who know they

are wretched and damned, I searched about for something, anything. Anything other than my depraved passions, as solace. I was disgusted by them, at last recognising their lure for what they were; lies, upon a hook of death.

Then came the next stage of my life, as sudden and clamorous a shift from dark to light as the light to dark had been long and subtle. I became a Christian.

Isn't it odd that we fill up so frenziedly upon the things that empty us? Like junk food, we crave what ultimately ails us, and why? Because on the surface it appears so satisfying.

Jesus called this walking by sight. In contrast, he said we should live by faith. From everything I've come to understand, faith comes very hard to the human psyche. To me, faith is like the pure deeper waters of a well, its depths reached by passing through all layers above. Through the flotsam and scum. Through the warm mosquito larvae infested layer below. Further, past all that would pretend itself as pure water, until one comes to true, deep, liberating faith. I've found there is a secret to living at such depth. Breathe. Odd, I know. Too often I think we treat faith like a dive, we hold our breath until it's over and then return to the surface to breathe again, back through the lies. Off course, now the next act of faith

requires another dive, through all the pretend options; tempted by each on the way.

I think Jesus breathed faith with the same reliance we do air; how else could he be sinless. Of course, like breathing water, I suspect there's a supernatural element required to faith-breathing. Maybe this is why stories involving water figure so often in the bible. Possibly faith is as much a work of God as it is our own.

I think confession should be an act of faith; not therapy; not unloading, but faith.

God, please help me to breathe.

No doubt now you're thinking, *'What a worm'*, or, *'Wow! What a changed man'*.

Don't. For the story continues. Reserve your verdict. I promise you it will change.

Jeff was twenty-nine when he came back into my life; from a boy I had watched growing from a distance, now into the man. Of course, he was ignorant that I often watched as he travelled past my home; from the toddler to the kindergartner, school boy, high-school and then on to university. That was the end of it I had believed, he never to be seen again. It was to be expected, my friendship with his mother having dissolved soon after I moved from her

apartment. I only saw her on the odd occasions, mainly when Jeff was younger; when she pushed his stroller or walked with him in the park opposite my house; or later, at the supermarket. The shallowness of our past was most evident then, for we said not a word to each other, I for shame, she, I'm not sure.

The next I saw of Jeff, he was attached to my daughter.

It was a Friday, early evening. Liz had been in the kitchen most of the afternoon preparing some gastronomic delight for Samantha's return, and was now showering upstairs. I was reading the newspaper in the lounge, anticipatory of Sam's arrival, though currently lost in the sports page; the NAB Cup—Sydney Swans vs. St Kilda—was later that evening.

On hearing the front door open, I hastily refolded the paper and was about to rise when she walked around the corner—with him.

As experiences go, few in my life have been as emotively diametric. My daughter's smile was ear to ear. Mine had fallen off my face and shattered on the floor. It was as if judgement had walked into my lounge. Never slow to read even my subtle moods, Samantha's smile faded in confusion at my palpable expression. While I, never the multitasker, could formulate no words while

rebuilding the facade of a pleasant visage.

So it was that Jeff spoke first.

For him it was your less than typical meeting of the girlfriend's family experience. He hid well whatever thought he had of my strange behaviour behind his own contrived smile.

"Mr Sutherland, it's nice to meet you Sir. Samantha speaks very highly of you."

It was evident that all memory of when and what I'd been in his life as a toddler was long faded from recollection. I was a stranger to him.

He was my most intimate shame.

It was Liz's bounding arrival that saved me from my tongues paralysis, her sanguinity harnessing all attention.

Self composure is so much easier when other's eyes are turned. With an effort none in that room comprehended, I managed it. Yet a door had reopened, only a crack, but fearful to me in that a gentle draught would swing it wide. It was the door to my shed, empty now of vice, though full still; of guilt, self-reproach and debilitating disgrace.

My sin is ever before me. This was the lament of King David, he who was said to be *a man after God's own heart*. Easy it is to confess and forget a sin barely

mourned, uncomplicated to move past iniquities that merely twinge us to repentance. But, I think, there are no few of us haunted by some great sin, such that, long after confession is made, it remains a threat still.

It was an uncomfortable meal for me that evening.

They had met at university, she a first year arts student, he finishing his last in a bachelor of mechatronic engineering. I had to look that one up. Seems Jeff was a bright spark; which from a prospective father-in-laws standpoint should have earned him considerable merit. Instead I was wishing he was at least mildly retarded; less a menace to my fearfulness. Yet as the evening passed I discovered his capacities also extended into the deeper, meaningful realms of wisdom and honesty. He shared with us his past.

Jeff spoke of having no father, though he remembered snatches of another man that lived with his mother from his earliest years.

Never have I breathed so shallow for so long.

As part of me listened, fascinated, another cringed in dread, while a third prayed for a miracle. However no divine extraction occurred that day, nor since, though sought-for earnestly many times.

Of his mother he spoke with fondness and respect, “she’s special”, “I wouldn’t be where I am without her”, but clarified it with a glimpse of his *difficult years*, as he put it. A time in which he’d been a bad son, befriended the wrong people, even managed to earn time in juvenile detention.

I was just swallowing a bite of potato when the cruncher came.

“Then I became a Christian”.

The potato made a slow and painful journey. It’s true, remorse felt for wrongs committed against a stranger amplify for those of a more cherished connection. For me, the link connecting us had just become sacred. All I felt was the need to escape into some dark and lonely place and pray.

You might be thinking that I’d be glad, glad that in spite of my crime, Jeff had turned out well. I was. The relief felt over any serious wound that heals. Yet, and the only way I can explain this is to say that when we sin against another, we sin against ourselves. I was guilty still of a crime against this man and his mother, and myself.

Sexual immorality, the bible declares it the only sin one commits against their own body, all others being outside the body. I won’t pretend to understand all that

implies, but have experienced something of it. For, as it says, it has *waged war against my soul*. For so many years after becoming a Christian, I battled with temptation and failure in the arena of my transgression. Like that man who cut out his eye to prevent it sinning, so I removed from myself all that might so easily entangle me. I could not go to the beach for the fuel such sights provided, I cancelled my internet connection and, for some time, lived without TV. Anything that tempted me, this I withdrew from. Yet in one area I failed. Though confessing my battle with lust and the more 'acceptable' sins, I have never confessed my crime; other than to God. A truth that has gnawed at my heart for decades.

What is the acceptable Christian response to crimes committed before one became a Christian? Is the thief obligated to confess to the police after baptism? Is the fraudster obliged to spend the next twenty years of his life in an effort to repay those he has defrauded? Should the Pimp go to his girls and apologise? And what of the non-criminal sins? *If there is such a thing in Gods eyes*. Should liars front up to all they have lied to throughout the years? Or, is it, that along with forgiven and forgotten by God is annulled all rectifying requirements we might imagine necessary? Does true repentance demand I confess all to men as well as God? I'm not sure. Though, in truth, it is

my fear of possible ramifications that deters as much as any doctrinal confusion. Man is not as merciful as God.

God, help me to breathe.

“What’s wrong dad, why were you acting so weird?”

This from Sam, the second she’d returned from kissing Jeff goodbye. There was a disconcerted expression on her face. Her complaint was quickly followed upon by Liz.

“Yes, Kerry, you *were* acting odd, is something the matter?”

But for these two people maybe I would have confessed years ago. Yet it is a tangled web that sin does weave; and I do not speak of my own sin here. Liz was herself a victim of child abuse. This I discovered a year into our marriage. It haunts us both.

My wife does not share my faith, though she respects it and has attended services and church events without quibble many times. She’s a tender, energising, and wonderfully supportive wife, but she hates what was done to her and harbours anger still. Ironically I am angry too. Sound hypocritical? Like a man concerned for his sisters virtue as he selfishly ruins another’s. So too, I imagine, you consider me. However, my love for Liz is deep & genuine, as is my concern for her soul. Both prevent me from confessing. For all this I am angry.

Fear upon fear, so the number of gates to my own confession increase, locked and guarded. I wasn't going to lose my wife.

That was once my reasoning. I know better now.

Fear, like faith, is a deep well; more a vortex. Too easy it is to mistake fear for wisdom. However, faith and fear are different wells, and wisdom abides only at the depths of one.

It was fear that determined much of Samantha's upbringing. Liz's unresolved past perpetuating itself into our daughter's future through stifling rules justified by exaggerated suspicions. From me, a father so guarded, so afraid of his past that he shared only half himself. In attempting to hide one great failing, I unwittingly appeared to hide all others, so projecting a facade that Samantha realised, as all children eventually do, was a lie. No parent can pretend perfection forever.

This also, I think, is the reason my daughter does not share my faith. In proliferating my father's fault, I, by example, taught her that it is better to hide a failing than confess it, to conceal the past than offer it up accountably. No one turns to God with such a mindset, for it is founded in fears well; and fear is faith's foulest enemy. I question my own source of wisdom in this.

Time passed, as time does, stopping for neither need nor loss. I remember reading Raymond Feist's *Riftwar* saga and envying Pug, the immortal magician. At will he could pass between worlds, entering the *void in-between*; a place of no time and in which nothing ever happened. I think if such a place was accessible to all, it would be an over populated corridor.

Seven months later they were married. Commenting on the wedding many said it was memorable. I must concur, it was. Of the things I do well, organising is one of them. Though I can't take credit for the creativity and flair of the day, I will for the planning of it.

By this time Jeff and I had a working relationship. That is to say, I walked on broken glass in his presence and he mistook this as pleasant company.

In truth, I had come to like the man. My daughter had done well in landing with him. Such that I found myself happy for her in spite of the predicament it left me.

But I get too far ahead, I forget to mention Alice.

In some ways the panic of meeting Jeff paled besides meeting his mother. Although not as sudden an entry as that of the son, the advanced notice of her arrival did little to alleviate my churning anguish, to the point I tossed up whether to visit her in private, before the formal meet. I

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