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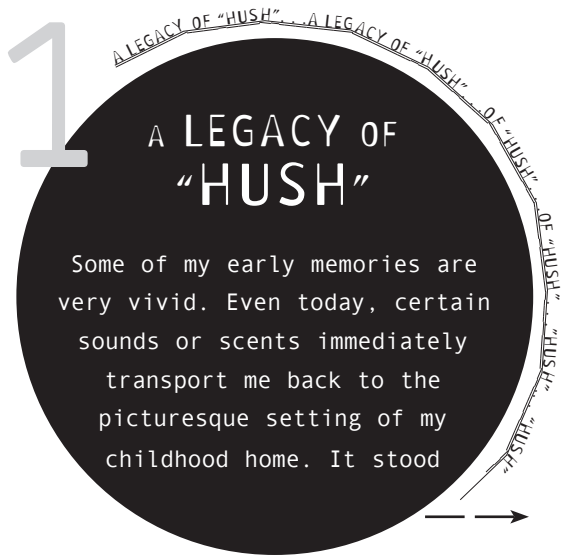
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A LEGACY OF "HUSH"

Some of my early memories are very vivid. Even today, certain sounds or scents immediately transport me back to the picturesque setting of my childhood home. It stood

AS I STOOD

THERE IN

SILENCE

THE TURMOIL

WITHIN ME GREW WORSE.

Psalm 39:2

on a hill off an old country road in a small farm town in Ohio. I can still picture myself coming home after school, walking up the long lane to the white three-bedroom ranch-style house with blue shutters.

When I arrived, my crazy little dog, Frisbee, would get so excited he would jump all over me, while my more composed cat, Cotton, would rub against my legs, leaving a trail of white dander to blow in the wind and land on my clothes. Mom would be waiting for me at the sliding glass door of her sewing room, where she crafted dolls to sell at festivals and art shows. It was the perfect home for the perfect family.

THE PERFECT FAMILY

I was one of the few kids in my school lucky enough to have a “cool” mom. You know, the kind you don’t mind being seen with in public, the kind who buys you clothes you’ll actually wear. My mom was hip without even trying to be. It was just who she was. She looked cool. She dressed cool. She talked cool. She was smart and funny. My friends seemed to like hanging out with her almost as much as they did with me.

Mom was a great friend as well as an awesome mother. She was always there for me and always understanding, even when I made those dreaded phone calls from school to say I’d forgotten my basketball shoes or left my homework on the kitchen table. I felt I could talk to her about anything.

My parents divorced when I was only a year old, and my mother remarried when I was three. My stepfather, Vince, was a salesman, and every day he’d go out to scour the countryside for customers. I used to pretend I was going to work just as Daddy V did.

My mom would pack a lunch for me in a brown paper bag. I would kiss her good-bye and head out the kitchen door to the garage. I pretended that my truck was the old gray Ford tractor parked in the corner of the garage. I would climb up on the red metal seat and eat my lunch. I always told my mom not to look at me because, after all, I wasn't really there. I was driving to work! You can imagine how exciting it was when Vince let me sit on his lap and steer the tractor as he drove it around our property.

My mother and stepfather were attentive, loving parents. They were always there to tuck me into my soft pink bed at night, read me a bedtime story, and say a night-time prayer. They encouraged me to discover and pursue my talents, and I always knew they would support me in all my activities, which eventually included ballet, gymnastics, basketball, volleyball, track, and art.

Daddy V was always willing to spend time with me. I never felt like an unwanted stepchild. He treated me as if I were his own daughter. He was always there to push me on the swing or ride bikes down the road and back. When I wanted to play basketball, he dropped whatever he was doing to practice shooting with me. He encouraged me to work hard and play hard, and he was my biggest sports fan. I always knew that he believed in me, and that gave me the confidence to try anything.

This was Vince's second marriage as well, and his three children visited us frequently. Our healthy, loving relationships could have served as a model for other blended families. It was akin to *The Brady Bunch*—only without the maid! My stepsister Steph and I were the same age and best friends. She spent every weekend and most of the summer with us.

Of course there was also the extended family: grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins. Our house was where every-

BEHIND THE BLUE SHUTTERS: one would gather
OF MY PERFECT HOME, I whenever there was
WAS LEARNING THINGS: a reason to throw a
NO CHILD SHOULD: party. The family album
EVER KNOW. bulged with photos of the
annual Fourth of July birthday
party, where my cousin Mandy, my
stepsister Crystal, and I were the guests
of honor. At Christmas and sometimes at
Easter, our home was the scene of two family
dinners, one for each side of the family. The aroma
of homemade rolls drifting from the oven, the taste
of freshly baked pies, and the warmth of a close-knit
family left everyone longing for the next occasion to make
memories together.

When I was little, I wanted to know everything. I
couldn't understand why I had to wait to know what every-
one else already knew. When I was three, I begged Mom to
teach me to read; she finally taught me when I was four. I
couldn't figure out what the holdup was. Why did I have to
wait so long?

I remember spending hours following along with
the pages as I listened to books on tape. These weren't the
ones you can find at the local library. These were homemade!
Mom would record a cassette tape of herself reading one
of my books, and when it was time to turn the page, she
recorded herself ringing a bell. She must have been obsessed
with bells, because she also had a dinner bell she rang every
night to call us in to eat. I never knew whether it was time
to read or time to eat!

In first grade, my teacher gave each student in our
class a paper to fill out for our first visit to the library. It

asked what kind of book we wanted. If we found it, we were to write down the title. I was looking for a book that would tell me “all the stuff that grown-ups know.” After searching shelf after shelf for this book, I finally gave up and wrote, “They didn’t have a book like that.” At the bottom of the paper, my teacher wrote, “That’s too bad!”

I now know that it was a good thing there wasn’t a book like that. From all outward appearances, I had the perfect family and the perfect life. But behind the blue shutters of my perfect home, I was learning things no child should ever know.

I learned a lot from my stepfather. He told me how to build a bluebird house, but he also told me dirty jokes. He showed me how to use a clutch to shift, but he also showed me pornographic movies. He taught me how to grow a big vegetable garden, but he also taught me how to stimulate a man. He made me believe that it was safe to tell him anything, but he also made me believe that it was never safe to tell anyone “our little secret.”

OUR LITTLE SECRET

As I grew, at times the memories of my stepfather’s abuse had a dreamlike quality that made it difficult to know whether it really happened. Though some memories are still shrouded in clouds and mystery, I remember some events as clearly as if they happened yesterday.

One day when I came walking up the driveway after school, I didn’t see Mom at the door. I remembered her telling me that she might be late because she had to go to town for groceries, so I headed to the big rock in one of our flower beds where the spare house key was hidden. As I bent over

to move the rock, my stepfather came out of the house. I wasn't expecting him to be home early, so he startled me. He told me that the customer he had called on was working out in the fields, so he had decided to meet with him the next morning instead.

I went inside, plopped my books on the dining room table, and got myself a bowl of ice cream to eat while I did my homework. Vince wanted to play slapjack, my favorite card game. I was only in second grade and didn't have much homework to do, so I agreed to play. He wanted to make up a new rule and asked me to come up with one. I didn't have any ideas, so he said that whoever won a hand got to tickle the other person. I hated tickle games, but I loved playing slapjack.

Vince won the first hand. Then the second. And the third. The more he won, the more uncomfortable the tickling became. After the fifth game, he grabbed me from behind, pulled me onto his lap and put both of his hands on my chest. I tried to pull away, but he was strong, and he held me tighter. I screamed for him to stop. He laughed and said, "But I won! I get to tickle you until I'm done." Then he let go.

I didn't want to play anymore, but he said that if we played one more hand and I won, I could do my homework. He let me win the last one, but when I reached for my math book, he grabbed my hand and told me I had to tickle him. I didn't want to tickle him, and I barely touched him. I felt like throwing up.

Vince got mad at me and when Mom came home, he told her that I was acting cold toward him and that I'd hurt his feelings because he thought I would be excited that he was home early. Even though I hated the tickle game, he made me feel bad for pushing him away. I had wanted to tell Mom how I felt about the tickling, but not after what he told her.

I also clearly remember one night when I was about nine or so. For fun our family would throw empty aerosol cans into our outside firepit. (Obviously, there wasn't much to do in our small country town!) Then we'd run for cover and listen. Pretty soon we'd hear it—*pop!* One evening, Vince came into the house to tell me that he had some aerosol cans to throw into the firepit. Mom was working on her crafts, so I went outside alone with him. He gave me a can to throw, and as soon as I did, we ran as fast as we could into the woods behind our house.

Usually a can would pop in a matter of seconds, but this one didn't. Vince told me to sit down on the ground with him and wait. He sat behind me, with his legs on either side of me and his arms hugging my shoulders. We giggled and whispered, trying to be quiet enough to hear the pop. Still nothing. He kept talking about why it might take awhile for the can to get hot enough.

HE
TOLD
ME THAT
IT WAS OUR
LITTLE
SECRET.

At the same time he was whispering to me, his right hand was going down the front of my pants and into my underwear. I froze. He was touching me all over down there. I couldn't breathe. I prayed the can would pop so we could go inside the house. I tried to get up. He told me to sit still and enjoy it. I didn't enjoy it. I didn't even know what "it" was, but I wanted whatever it was to be over. I pushed his hand away.

He told me that it was our little secret.

As we walked back into the garage, he told me that it was our little secret and that if Mom ever knew what we did together, she would be very jealous. When we reached the steps leading into the house from the garage, he made me stand on the second step. Then he lifted my shirt and put his

mouth on my breast. I felt so dirty. After forty seconds that seemed like an eternity, he reminded me how important it was for me to never tell. He said that if I told and Mom divorced him, it would be my fault and she would never want to see me again.

I turned around and walked into the house, acting as if nothing had happened. Vince came in a few minutes later, doing the same. But whenever he caught my eye, he would wink at me. That night my fear and confusion kept me from telling my mom, and because I kept silent, my stepfather continued to abuse me.

HUSH!

As a child, I believed that Vince loved me and that he would never mean to hurt me. Yet I still felt scared and confused, and I remember times when I wondered if what he was doing was wrong. He kept telling me that I was very special and that what he was doing was okay. He was my stepdad, and I trusted him. I also remember that whenever I became angry with him and pushed him away, he wouldn't talk to me for days. Sometimes it seemed that he was nice to me only before he molested me. Then he would say things like "If you love me, you'll let me." I did love him, and I didn't want to upset him or make him sad.

Vince was a very smart man. He was very careful about the kind of activities and groups we were involved in. Though we were Christians and committed to our faith, there was an unspoken law in our home that we weren't to go to church.

My mom became a Christian when she was eight years old, and my stepdad when he was a young adult. During his

first marriage, Vince was a leader in his church. But after his divorce he felt a lot of shame and anger. I think he felt judged because of the divorce, so he basically abandoned the church community and tried to live the Christian life on his own.

While I was growing up, we were always conscious of God in our daily life. Our entire family belief system was based on the Bible. We applied it to our lives. We prayed together and tried to live a Christian life. Family friends and kids at school always considered my family Christians, and even as a little girl I was very conscientious about setting a Christlike example.

At the time, I was never sure why we didn't go to church, but looking back, it's clear that Vince considered church a safe place where our little secret might slip out. Unaware that he was abusing me, my mom went along because she didn't want to rock the boat. Vince directed every moment of her life. He guarded her time more closely than he did his own. She had to account for everywhere she went and how she spent every minute of her day. She felt as if she was always walking on eggshells around him, and she didn't want to do anything to disrupt what she and everybody else considered our perfect family life. Mom told me that there were times she wanted to tell him she was going to go to church on her own, but she was scared of how he would react.

Like my stepdad, abusers are characteristically controlling and overprotective not only of the child victim, but also of the nonoffending parent and anyone else in the child's circle who might one day spill the beans. They often isolate their victims to keep them from realizing that other families don't do these things.

My father, Gary, and my stepmother, Kathy, married when I was six. They have two children: my sister, Amber,

and my brother, Garrett. I love them all dearly and enjoy spending time with them at their farm. However, that wasn't always the case.

When I was little, my stepdad often told me that my father was a bad dad and that he didn't really love me as much as I thought he did. He said that the custody rights could be changed when I turned twelve and that my father was going to try to take me away from my mom as soon as my birthday came. Vince did everything he could to make me think that my father didn't care as much about me as he did about getting back at my mom for their divorce. He tried to keep me from spending too much time with my father and made me feel guilty for wanting to go to his house. As I grew older, I began to accept these lies, just as I accepted his lies about the abuse.

One day when I was in fifth grade, the local sheriff deputy came to show our class a video. It was a cartoon. It might sound strange that she would come to a school library to watch cartoons with a bunch of ten-year-olds. But the cartoon wasn't really funny at all. It was about an uncle who took his nephew on a fishing trip. While they were in the boat, the uncle said strange things and touched his nephew in places that made the boy feel very uncomfortable. The deputy emphasized that what the uncle did was wrong. My stomach was tied up in knots. I felt uncomfortable and scared, just like the boy in the video. I really wanted to talk to somebody.

After the video ended, we lined up to go back to class. I cut to the front of the line and whispered to my teacher, Mrs. Webber, that I wanted to tell her something. But then I said, "I'll just wait and write about it during journal time on Wednesday."

When Wednesday rolled around, I wrote a poem about a bear named Mr. Stutter who liked peanut butter. It seemed obvious to me that Mr. Stutter had nothing to do with what I wanted to tell her, and I decided that if my secret was really that important, Mrs. Webber would follow up and ask me what I wanted to talk to her about. But weeks went by, and Mrs. Webber never asked. And I never told.

FROM LOOKING AT ME NO ONE WOULD EVER HAVE IMAGINED HOW MUCH TURMOIL WAS GOING ON INSIDE ME: I remember feeling that I had no choice and no way to get out of my situation. I forced myself to believe that it wasn't that big of a deal. I would just have to suffer through it and not tell anyone. I thought I had to protect my mom and keep our perfect family together.

From looking at me, no one would ever have imagined how much turmoil was going on inside me. Nobody could have known that I was longing to be someone else, trying to figure out how I could run away from home, and sometimes even wishing my life would end. I was plagued with horrible nightmares, and I would often wake up crying. I was miserable, and I was scared.

Keeping silent was taking a terrible toll. Nevertheless, I thought I would have to live with this deep, dark secret for the rest of my life, for I was too afraid to tell.