

## Narrative Conscience and the Autoethnographic Adventure Probing Memories, Secrets, Shadows, and Possibilities

By: [Christopher N. Poulos](#)

Poulos, C. (2008). Narrative Conscience and the autoethnographic adventure: Probing memories, secrets, shadows, and possibilities. *Qualitative Inquiry* 14:1, 46-66.

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### **Abstract:**

This article explores the common practice in families of keeping secrets close, allowing them to develop a life of their own. The problem with this practice is that the secrets often won't stay put, emerging into everyday life as (sometimes unwelcome) interruptions in the flow of healthy living. Indeed, secrets and memories—if they remain untold stories—may, at times, be crippling. In this article, the author discusses the process of storying family secrets as a way to engage personal and family healing. In the writing of autoethnographic research, the relationship between the researcher and his or her significant others becomes a primary locus of ethical action. Relational research ethics, informed by narrative conscience, calls the researcher to embrace new layers of complexity in the search for the right story, written with care, while offering narrative and dialogic methodologies for dealing with the dilemmas that come with the territory.

**Keywords:** autoethnography; deception; ethics; memory; secret; shadow; silence; story

### **Article:**

#### *The Contours of Secrecy*

“There is no guarding against memory. That’s the devil of it. It slips in before you can catch yourself, closing your throat, startling your heart. . . . Anything can trigger it—the unexpected convergence of a particular sight and sound, a specific smell, a song. Anything. And there is absolutely no way to protect against it.”

—Anne D. LeClaire (2001)

“You’re only as sick as your secrets.”

—Anonymous

A light breeze, barely noticeable, kicks up as the mist begins to lift on this new dawn. A leaf blows across my path. A squirrel takes quick refuge in my oak tree. The cold is giving way to the slightest hint of warmth, and the birds have begun to notice. It will be a beautiful day, bringing with it the suggestion of spring, which is, of course, a time of hope. We perch on the edge of the new, breathing with anticipation.

But somehow, I think hope may fade quickly on this day.

Somewhere in the lingering shadows, a dark secret lurks . . .

I awoke this morning with a start, shaken from the darkness by a dream. In my dream, we have to dispose of a body. It is a person, though I do not know who it is. All I know is that we have to hide it, before anyone finds out. We—my family and I—are desperately trying to figure out how to do this quickly, before someone stumbles along and discovers our secret. But we have nowhere to put the body. Eventually, we find a box to stuff it in. But that, of course, just shifts the problem, and only a little.

Now what? Where can we hide the box?

Eventually, we decide that the spare bedroom—a room we never use and that isn't furnished anyway—is a likely place to start. Of course, it won't do to keep a body, even a body in a box, out in the open, even in a spare, unused bedroom. So we get a crowbar, and bust a hole in the closet floor, so that we can bury the body underneath the floorboards. As we do this, we discover seeping water under there, but our options are limited, so we move ahead with our plan. We dig a hole in the ground under the floor, and we bury the box.

But, you know, there is that smell—that terrible smell of death. Even when we put the floor back in place, even when we replace the carpet, even when we lock the door and walk away, that smell will not go away.

So, a few days later, we go back in, and we see that the water is starting to seep up from below and into the carpet. And the water, mixed with gray clay the color of rotting flesh, smells of death.

And the smell begins to permeate everything.

Funny how this smell—long after I buried the memories of early traumas, long after the forgotten secrets seeped out of these experiences—still permeates many of my darkest dreams.

The smell of death.

The whiff of memory.

The stench of a secret.

That insistent, acrid, horrible smell is what tells me the secret won't stay put . . .

The floorboards in the spare room are buckling.

## Signs

Sometimes, events in our lives seem meaningfully connected, linked not just by chance but by some larger organizing principle.

At others, it all seems so random.

Have you ever been in a conversation (or elsewhere) and found yourself in a moment of breakthrough, an “aha!” or epiphany?

Have you ever been minding your own business, going about your day, and found the tattered shreds of a dream, or a memory, or a secret, seeping into your consciousness?

Have you ever felt the thin wisp of a partial memory hovering at the edge of consciousness, just out of reach?

Or have you ever had a full memory come flooding back, unannounced, suddenly overwhelming you?

Have you ever felt something being triggered, something inside you that is, perhaps, unpleasant and only marginally linked to the current situation?

Have you ever been in a conversation and found yourself, or someone else, saying or doing something that seems inappropriate or out of turn?

Have you ever had or witnessed an outburst?

Have you ever felt a shadow creeping up into your mind, over your heart, through your consciousness?

Have you ever wondered at the darkness within your—or someone else's— soul?

Have you ever pondered how thin the line might be between sanity and madness or between dream and reality or between memory and truth or between secret and story?

These and other questions hover at the edge of my mind sometimes. And I look around the world for signs, for something to make sense of these experiences. I seek clues. As a detective of everyday life, an ethnographer, I observe and participate in this world, and I seek to bring a storied sense to my experience.

My neighbor, a woman in her late 70s, has an adult son, middle-aged, probably around 50 or so, who is a diagnosed schizophrenic. He sometimes comes to stay with her, as he finds it hard to maintain a household or to live among other humans. He is prone to outbursts of shouting, though this is not usually directed at another human. Rather, he shouts aloud to unseen people, in words and sounds most of us cannot understand.

One day recently, as I was walking down my driveway toward my garage, something in my neighbor's backyard caught my eye. I couldn't make out what it was, but for some reason, I found myself drawn to it. As I got closer, it still took a moment to register what it was I was seeing. At first it made no sense. But here it was, lying in the grass: a simple painting of a black background, in the center of which was a large red heart. It looked like the artwork of a child of about age 6, with the simple, familiar, valentine-shaped heart we all recognize. But what was striking about this scene was that someone had driven an axe—yes, a full-sized firewood-chopping axe—through the center of the heart.

As I gazed upon it, I found myself wondering how to interpret this particular sign. Was this something that should cause me fear? Or bring me fascination? Was it an obvious sign of madness? A moment of breakthrough? The act of a lunatic? A symbolic gesture? A warning? Performance art? An outburst? The revelation of a secret about this man? About his family? About our world? Was this an opening up of the “heart of darkness”— the secret life of a tortured soul? What, if anything, could a gesture such as this one tell us about the self, about family, about community, about communication?

And this “sign” got me to thinking about the connections between consciousness and communication, between dream and reality, between art and madness, between thinking and connecting with others, between loneliness and community, between secrets and stories—all while I was pondering this idea that sometimes we are “gripped” by a dream, or by an image, or by a story, or by a secret, or by a burst of insight or creativity or even genius.

And I got to thinking about how, sometimes, a moment of darkness or pain or trauma or difficulty from our past may “break in” to our current consciousness and seem to derail us as we go about our business. And this artifact, this savaged painting, also got me to thinking about how thin the lines are between sanity and insanity, between happiness and despair, between communication and terrible miscommunication, between love and hate, and above all between that part of ourselves we can call consciousness and that which is within us that is unconscious but that, from time to time, seems to want—or need—to bubble up into our conscious lives.

## **Memories and Secrets**

The problem with memories is that no matter how much you try to ignore or bury them, they won't stay put. They show up in the strangest of places, at the oddest of times. Triggered by seemingly random events in our everyday world, the in-breaking of memory can be as faint as a whisper, as nagging as an itch, as blinding as a flash of lightning, as chilling as an Arctic wind, as breathtaking as a plunge into icy water. Or it can just sort of seep into your consciousness, like too much rain seeping through saturated ground into the edges of a basement. When the memory is of trauma, there is often an insistent human urge to bury it. In part, this comes from the difficulty of dealing with pain and grief in a culture that doesn't welcome human discomfort; in part, it simply

seems that, to go on in our world, we must work to not let the memory overwhelm. We are, after all, a culture of “doers,” locked deeply into the convergent ideologies of Puritanism and the American Dream, and it is hard to “do” when hobbled by pain.

As humans, we often stumble along through life, alternately happy, then sunk in ordinariness, then beset by trauma. In the face of traumatic events in our lives, with pain and grief, anger and fear, loss and loneliness, shame and humiliation visited upon us through the death of a loved one, or through the breaking of a relationship, or through the strange and unpredictable and sometimes unkind actions of others, through the twisted dynamics of addiction, through burgeoning dysfunction arising in the wake of compounding problems, and through other harbingers, both ordinary and extraordinary, of “disease,” we find ourselves thrown into an ancient human dialectic, which the Greeks represented as the twin goddess Mnemosyne–Lesmosyne.

In Greek mythology, this was a two-faced goddess: Mnemosyne, who represented memory, was the mother of the Muses. Lesmosyne, goddess of forgetting, was the creator and tender of the river Lethe, the river of forgetting that the dead cross over on the way to the underworld (Kerenyi, 1977). These twin faces of the goddess, memory and forgetting, are dynamic and powerful forces in the play of everyday life. As Alan McGlashan (1986) puts it,

perhaps the two most moving chords that can be struck from the human heart are contained in these four words: I remember, I forget. For the unheard anthem of our whole existence is created out of the antiphonal movements of remembering and forgetting . . . perfect balance between this pair of opposites is the mark of maturity. . . . Memory is, in fact, the mortar between all events, a veritable *glutinum mundi*. . . . But if memory is a vital function, so also is forgetting. To forget is essential to sanity . . . (p. 6)

And so we find ourselves tacking back and forth between these two vital energies—the memory that holds us in a coherent life narrative and the forgetting that allows us to go on in the face of pain and loss and trauma. Sometimes, with memories surging up from the depths of our (un)consciousness, we find ourselves at a loss as to what to do. We can be frozen in place, or stunned, or even trapped by these memories. On the other hand, sometimes, mercifully, our spirits are protected by the power of forgetting, at least for a time.

Knowing, at least intuitively, that forgetting is essential to sanity, knowledgeable human agents consciously and unconsciously craft strategic means of managing the dialectics of memory and forgetting (Giddens, 1984). One of these strategies is a strategy of silence, the kind of silence that disrupts the story, a silence that keeps the narrative from being spoken—and thus defusing its power a little—a heavy, silencing silence (Clair, 1998; Poulos, 2004, 2006) that builds into a secret. A story told is a powerful thing that can unleash all sorts of grief; an untold story gives off at least the illusion of control.

*We will not talk about this; it will be our little secret.*

And thus secret keeping can become a central form of family communicative practice. Further invigorating secret keeping as a communicative practice are the concomitant dialectics at play in the presentation of the public and the private “faces” of a family. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman (1959) writes, “I assume that when an individual appears before others he will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation” (p. 15). A similar rule holds, I contend, for families; families work hard to control impressions others have of them. Only the situation is far more complicated than that of individual impression management. The dynamics of family impression management are complicated by the multiple, complex, and sometimes convoluted relationships and communication patterns that exist in any given family. These are matters of increasing complexity as time goes on and alliances are formed, or relationships are strained, or new trauma enters the scene.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, when I was a child coming of age, this impression management often took the form of that ever-looming rhetorical question, suggested by televised families working their charms on our world, continuing the legacy of good old 1950s American conformity where at least one of the penultimate values was fitting in and looking good: “Now what will the neighbors think?” This question hovered in the background every time I, as a young boy, considered engaging in even the slightest forms of mischief, or when I began to appear *different*, like when I grew my hair long and pulled it back into a ponytail before slipping on my ripped jeans and my black bad-boy rock ‘n’ roll T-shirt. It was even more powerful when we began to edge into conflict—which was, as the years went by, ever more likely and ever more noisy.

In my family’s particular case, much of this impression management was instigated, in part at least, because of my father’s social position as a rector (head priest) of an Episcopal church. There is simply very little maneuvering room in terms of the impressions such people can be allowed to portray. The definition of the role stipulates that the impressions ought to be positive. In such cases, it often comes as a shock to the system if things don’t go well; the feeling of loss that comes with the death of a loved one, for example, can topple the precarious “positive” impressions a family works so hard to give off.

Unfortunately, in human social life, we move quickly from the categories of “normal” or even admired or honored to stigmatized, disavowed, or outcast. A family cast into pain and silence, alternating with grief and rage, can quickly fall into the category of “odd”; it is a short, slippery downhill slope from there into the social hell of stigma. In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman (1963) writes of this process of stigmatization, or the reading and application of signs, that the person or people under scrutiny are in violation of some social norm or other and of how difficult it can be, once a person or a group is stigmatized, to extricate oneself or one’s group from that unfavorable categorization.

Mediating this stigmatization process is the widespread practice of “passing” for normal; At the center of the dynamics of a developing practice of passing is the active practice of secret keeping. Sadly, in our culture, if you are different—if you are too fat, too sad, too old, too gay, too short, too tall, too blind, too deaf, too dark skinned, too weak, too angry, too poor, too widowed, too hyper, too depressed, too mute, too malformed, too grief stricken, too thin, too dumb, or even too smart to be considered “normal”—then you are subject to stigmatization. You may well be seen as a *defective* other. And so we lapse into secret keeping, as keeping it secret so often seems the neater choice.

“This will be our secret,” she whispers.

And you nod before you know what you have done.

But what if the floorboards are buckling in the spare bedroom? What if the secret won’t stay put?

What if memories and the secrets they birth are like Aspen trees,<sup>1</sup> sending out their rhizomes in many directions, disrupting their own earthen burial sites with new sprouts, all of which are connected in some way to the ultimate realities of our shared universe?

What if, in the damp dark cellar of consciousness, the secret festers and bubbles, breaks down, and begins to smell?

What if, despite your best efforts, the damp, dark secret begins to seep into the carpet?

What if the secret comes rushing into your everyday life like an ill wind? What if the secret pushes itself up into the light?

What if no one can escape that smell?

And what if . . . maybe . . . just maybe . . . it shouldn't be a secret any more?

## **Stories**

This is an article about the dark contours of a life of secrecy, about the perils and the promises of secret keeping and secret breaking and about the healing power of storying our secrets into the light. It is an article about the ethics of revelation and about the deep connection that can come when someone musters the courage to tell the story.

I begin with stories. These are stories gathered out of secrets, born of hints and whispers and clues, of small story fragments that have slipped out or seeped into the lives of people I have known. These are the stories of a family—or, at least, part of one. The stories trace the family members' responses to sorrow, loss, trauma, and conflict that arise in their lives.

The stories here are necessarily incomplete and therefore, perhaps, inaccurate. But they are nonetheless stories that, like fading dreams in the early morning light, hover on the edge of consciousness, poised to tell us some truths about who we are. As such, they are not stories of particular people but rather stories about all of us who, in some way, have experienced trauma and have stumbled through life in its wake, alternately striving to pick up the clues offered by the sometimes quiet, sometimes overwhelming eruptions of memory. These are stories about the heart of forgetting and of secret keeping and of the illusory and tenuous and temporary protections that forgetting and secrecy offer. In the end, I will suggest that the power of story trumps the power of the secret and that the ethical move for the researcher of human social life is to tell the story in ways that will move us toward healing.

## **Life, Interrupted**

It comes like a rush of wind, the kind of wind that threatens to crack the windows, blow the door in, snap a pine and send it crashing into the roof.

“Push!” someone yells.

And she pushes.

And she feels the baby emerge.

She has done this before. A daughter—the light of her life—was born just a year ago. So she waits in anticipation of that magic moment when she will meet this one and hold him close to her heart.

But soon she realizes there is no sound, no first gasp for air, no crying.

Just silence.

*That's not right.*

The nurse turns to her, holding the tiny lifeless body of an infant, and says, “I'm sorry.”

*No!* And she feels the wind rushing out of her body. Gasping for air, and searching for light, blinking back tears, she begins to sob quietly.

*Dead.*

Before he was even alive.

*Dead?*

Now what? It was a tough pregnancy. She was sick most of the time. But she never imagined *this*. Later that day, as she lies in bed, staring at nothing—her baby gone, gone, gone forever—she vows never to speak of this.

“This will be our secret,” she tells her husband. “We will bury him, and we will never speak of it again, to anyone.”

And so, 2 days later, she stumbles out to the little graveyard for a private ceremony, attended only by her, her young husband, and their Methodist pastor, all dressed in black. They listen to the minister intoning the proper words.

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.*

She cries quietly, for the last time.

*Ashes to ashes.*

And they lower the tiny box into the ground, scoop dirt on it, and leave.

*Dust to dust.*

And they never again speak of this.

It is a very dark year. But the darkness begins to lift a little after a time, and life begins again. A baby is born the next year, and this one is big and strong and healthy, a son joining their 2-year-old daughter, helping to blot out the memory with their laughter.

Life goes on. The years pass, and memories fade.

And the secret just lies there, buried in the ground in a tiny box.

Almost 60 years later, she sits alone in her living room. She is old now, very old, and very nearly blind. Macular degeneration. In front of her is a large TV, and she sits too close to it, the volume turned way up.

At her side is a bottle of Sherry. She began drinking about 10 years ago. At first, it was very controlled. Just a little cocktail at 5. Soon, it was cocktails at 5 and 7:30. Then, it was a precocktail glass of Sherry at 2. Before long, it was Bloody Marys for breakfast, Sherry at 10, noon, and 2, Manhattans at 5 and 7:30.

Lately, she has taken to drinking her Sherry all day long, straight from the bottle.

Why dirty a glass?

Her liver is beginning to harden and to float a bit. She knows she will die soon. She doesn't care. In her mind, she will go to meet her baby soon, the one she never met.

Her heart is broken.

A few weeks later, she is dead. And no one ever speaks of her secret, or of her alcoholism.

*This will be our secret.*

## Sleep, Interrupted

It settles down on him like a warm, thick blanket of fog, lulling him to sleep. In sleep, he is free. He does not dream. As long as he sleeps, the rage fades away. His demons do not appear. As long as he sleeps . . .

*Sleep.*

The television helps. He comes home, pours a watery Scotch on ice or cracks a beer, settles into his chair, turns on the TV. Within minutes, the fog settles in, his head droops to his chest.

*Sleep.*

Some nights, he just sleeps straight through, missing dinner. Others, he gets up, stumbles out to the kitchen, eats in silence, and pads back to his den. And the fog settles in . . .

*Sleep.*

When he was young, his mother sang him to sleep.

*Sleep little baby, don't say a word . . .*

He was a happy—but nervous—little kid. He grew up in a small town, had many friends. His family was weird, and volatile, and loving. And controlling. And manipulative.

*Papa's gonna buy you a mockingbird . . .*

His father was distant, an immigrant who believed that a man should work. Most of the time, he was not home. He worked.

*And if that mockingbird don't sing . . .*

And when his father came home, he would shuffle into the den, settle into his chair, turn on the radio . . .

*Papa's gonna buy you a diamond ring . . .*

. . . And nod off. That's how he remembers his father—sitting in his chair, head bobbing, falling into sleep . . . first to the radio . . . in later years to the TV . . .

*And if that diamond ring don't shine . . .*

He remembers it like it was yesterday. The sound of glass shattering, followed by the guilt, quickly replaced by fear. He knows he will get it when Pop comes home. He rubs his backside, almost feeling the whipping before it even happens. Briefly, he contemplates running away from home. Instead, he spends the afternoon sitting under a tree in the backyard, sweating profusely.

But Pop says nothing about the window. He just walks into the dining room, takes a look, and goes out to the garage. He returns with a piece of cardboard and a roll of tape, covers the hole, and walks out of the room.

He never says a word. That cardboard remains in that window for 30 years, and no one ever speaks of it.



A few weeks later, they are eating dinner. Sal and Joe are arguing loudly. Mom sighs. Pop, spooning greens onto his plate, turns to the boy and says,

“Take some greens, boy.”

“No thank you.”

“What did you say?”

“No thank you, *sir*.”

“Take some greens.”

Muttering, the boy takes the platter, spoons a few greens onto his plate.

After dinner, the family goes for a ride in the car, the three children crammed into the back seat. He, the youngest, perches on the hump in the middle.

“Move over, squirt.”

“No! You move over!”

“Quiet!” yells Pop turning to glare back at them.

“You be quiet,” the boy mutters under his breath.

Pop glares at him.

*Wait until we get home.*

The threat is palpable. They finish the ride in total silence.

That day, the belt cuts into his skin. He bleeds in silence, a tear streaming down his cheek. And the pain wells up inside him, chokes off his voice, takes him to a dark place from which he feels he may never emerge. His skin begins to feel warm as the rage starts to seep into his blood. Sweat forms on his brow. Shaking now, he wants to break something, to beat someone. Hard.

But he never says a word to anyone about the quiet rage bubbling deep inside.

*A little secret.*

Years later, he jumps up from his chair in front of the TV, startled awake by someone yelling out in the yard. He pulls the curtain aside, peers out into the darkness. His teenaged sons are out there, going at each other, fists flying.

*Drunk.*

And the rage wells up, pouring into his limbs. Fists clenched, he storms out into the yard, yells at the top of his lungs, “STOP!”

*Fuck you.*

*What did you say?*

*Fuck you, sir!*  
*STOP, I said!*

No response. The fists just keep flying. So he jumps in, punching away. He will pound the rage out of himself, out of them, out of their lives. The boys pull back, startled. They have never seen him like this.

Shaking, fists still clenched, he says through gritted teeth, "Inside. Now."

Silently, they walk into the house. And they never speak of this night again.

*Our little secret.*

One night, years later, he wakes with a start. Someone has turned off the TV. He looks up and sees his sister standing there, just staring at him, an inscrutable look on her face.

*Sally?*

And, just like that, she is gone.

*That was so long ago. Why is she here, now?*

And, at that moment, the memory pours in like a thick fog, only this time he sees it coming, sees each molecule of the fog with great clarity, so that it no longer seems to be fog at all, but just bits of water, floating about in the air in front of him. He is transported back in time . . .

Thirty years ago, standing in his living room, feeling uneasy.

*Something is not right here.*

He grabs his keys, heads out the door, steps into his car, drives slowly in the general direction of her apartment.

*Not like her. She calls. She always calls.*

Yesterday, it crossed his mind, but only for a moment.

*Sally didn't call.*

The next morning, the phone rings. It's Sally's boss. She didn't show up for work.

*Not like her.*

He pulls up to the curb in front of her apartment, which is in a converted old plantation house. A pretty nice place. He gathers himself, pulls up out of the front seat, slams the car door, takes a deep breath as he stands, looks around, spots her car in the lot. The stairs up to the front of the building seem steeper today, longer than he remembers. By the time he gets to the large front door, he is winded. He pauses, then pulls the heavy door open, turns into the hall, trudges up to the second floor.

He pauses again, in front of her door, knocks lightly. No answer.

*Sal?*

Almost a whisper.

*Sal?*

A little louder.

*SAL!?!*

Louder still.

He tries the knob, and it's locked. He jiggles the knob again, this time vigorously. A little "CLICK!" and the door swings open, groaning on its old heavy hinges.

*Not right.*

He walks back toward the bedroom, like he is being pulled there. The bedroom is empty, the bathroom door ajar. He pushes it open, tentatively, his fear mounting.

*Not right.*

And there she is, naked, sprawled over the edge of the tub, a little trickle of blood at the corner of her mouth.

*Dead.*

His only sister, she is—was—46 years old. Now she is gone. At the hospital, the doctor takes him aside, tells him it was her heart. It just sort of exploded. She probably never knew, except for a brief moment of pain. She went very quickly.

*Oh, Sally! Why didn't you call?*

For a moment, he feels a tightening in his chest, feels her pain. And that old rage surges up. He clenches his fists, tightly.

That evening, he pulls into his driveway. It's been a long day. He steps out of the car and walks inside. The family knows, and soon they will all ride up the road to his mother's home for the wake and the funeral. He wants to talk about it with someone, to lay it all out, to let go of the pain and the frustration and the rage, bottled up all these years. But they never speak of these things, never bring the pain to light, never talk about the sadness or the anger or the hurt.

*Our little secret.*

Instead, tonight, he will slip away. Sitting in front of the TV, an open beer on the table next to him, he feels the fog descending. His head droops . . . and . . . he hears his mother's voice, crooning softly . . .

*Sleep, little baby, don't say a word . . .*

### **Little Flashes**

It comes upon him in brief, blinding flashes, like the flash of a camera taking a picture you don't want to see.

One night, he and his little brother make a plan. He is 16. His brother is 15. They will find someone to buy it for them: a quart of cheap Scotch, a case of beer. Then, they will make their way out to the mountain and party!

They will drink until they can drink no more. As he approaches the young man standing on the corner near the front of the liquor store, there is something familiar about the guy. Is he smirking?

*Flash! His cousin, 16, sitting on the porch, smoking a cigarette, smirking.*

They get the beer and Scotch and drive out to the mountain. The next thing he remembers, he is in the drunk tank at the police station. The holding cell is a little room, only maybe 4 feet by 4 feet—a closet, really, with a steel bench and a steel door, no window. Arrested for public drunkenness, he comes to in a fog of nausea and fading memory.

*Flash! A small, cramped room, clouded with smoke, reeking of stale beer. The cousin's face, leering, smirking, laughing.*

“Let me out of here!” he yells, and pounds on the door.

A cop's voice responds laconically, “Shut up in there!”

“Let me out!”

Crisp steps on the concrete floor, then, the swish of a nightstick being pulled from its holster, and three quick raps on the door. A clear signal . . .

“Let me out!”

A year or two later, he finds himself sitting alone in the basement. From upstairs come faint sounds of dinner being prepared—clanking pots, scraping chairs, cabinet doors catching on the latch. He sits with a drink in his hand, a splash of cheap Scotch he swiped from his dad's cabinet. He is wondering what he will do next.

*Flash! He is about 8 or 9, maybe 10. He's standing in the corner, naked, embarrassed, his back against the wall. His teenaged cousin is sitting on the bed, smoking a cigarette. No! I don't want to see this. Go away. Let me out of here!*

And, just like that, it's gone.

Then, a few years later . . .

It's midnight on an ordinary weeknight, sometime in the mid-1970s. He is drunk, stumbling loudly around the house, looking for something but unable to focus. His young wife comes into the room, says something in a sharp voice, dripping with sarcasm, her words bleeding with barely suppressed anger.

*Flash! Pain! No! Oh, it hurts! Stop! No! Strong arms hold him in an icy grip, bruising his biceps. He is thrown to the floor. A heavy boot slams him in the ribs. No!*

And he cuffs her jaw: SLAP! The unmistakable sound of a hand striking flesh. Hard.

His little brother walks in, says, “Try me instead of her.”

So he does.

Soon fists are flying everywhere. A hard right cross, and a head slams against the floor. Brother on brother, on the floor, pounding out the rage.

The fists are flying hard now. Die! Die you son of a bitch!

*Flash! The cousin stands up, walks over to him, stares into his eyes. He averts his gaze, and the cousin takes a long drag on the cigarette, blows a smoke ring in his face. "That's right, kid. Keep that mouth of yours shut."*

The younger brother, now lying silent on the floor, in the fetal position, begins to lose consciousness. But the fists just keep coming. Blood on the floor, blood everywhere. Will it stop? Fists flying. Will it ever stop? Then someone else is in the room, pulling him off, shouting. "Stop! Stop man! You'll kill him!"

The brothers part company and do not speak for several years.

Four years later, now a landscaper who works long hours in the hot sun, he feels his strength building. His biceps are tight, powerful. Sweat drips down his brow. He wipes it away with a quick swipe, lifts the pick, slams it into the hard clay. There is something very basic about digging in the dirt, something primal and suggestive. At 6 that afternoon, as the sun begins its long fade into twilight, the humidity lifts a little. Such relief, no matter how small, is welcome. It has been a good day. He is tired. He is walking along a sidewalk, on his way to his truck, smoking a cigarette, thinking of nothing . . .

*Flash! That room again. It's dark. He sees only outlines. The shadow of his cousin, getting up from the rumpled bed in the corner, naked, smirking, a dark look in his eye. He is standing up against the wall on the opposite side of the room. He feels nothing. His body has gone numb. No!*

On the way home, he stops at the liquor store, buys a fifth of Jack Daniels. He will drink it that night—all of it.

As he sits on his couch, glass in one hand, cigarette in the other, the fog descends. He feels free. Jack will blot out the memories. The warm liquor courses down his throat, catches a little. His limbs begin to tingle, then go numb.

*Flash! Searing pain as his cousin pins his arms, digs a knee into his back, and climbs on . . . NO!*

Shaking, he stands, slams his fist into the wall, grabs the bottle and chugs. *NO! Let me out of here!*

Years later, he is standing on his front porch, watching his young daughter play in the yard. She is digging idly in the little sandbox he built for her. He is sober now and has been for a few years. He is happier than he has been in years, but as he stands there, it seems that the shadows are starting to return. He feels uneasy. He glances over at the corner of the house, notices that the end of day shadows are pushing their way across the lawn toward the crawl space under the house. That's how he feels inside—like the shadows are creeping in on him, about to hit the foundation.

Is that water he sees, seeping out from somewhere under the house?

*Flash! Pain, this time deep inside him. His cousin struts into the bathroom. He listens silently to the sounds of a long leak, flushing toilet, the shower being turned on.*

Her blond hair shifts in a small breeze, and catches the long rays of the sun with a glint. She glances up at him, grimaces at the cigarette in his hand, goes back to her digging, but this time with a little more force. The plastic shovel in her hand twists, and the handle cracks with a SNAP! She looks down at it, and a tear wells up in her eye, streams down her cheek. She cries silently.

*Flash! He hears a loud SNAP from the bathroom, followed by his cousin cursing. Something has broken. He doesn't care. But deep inside him, a new feeling wells up, overcomes the numbness . . . shame rumbling into anger, anger into rage. He begins to shake. And a tear streams down his cheek.*

One morning, 16 years later, he awakens with a start. What was that dream?

*Flash! The cousin's face looking back into the room, smirk still in place. "Get dressed. Get out. And keep your fat little mouth shut, or I'll do you again. This whole thing—well it's our little secret."*

He groans as he climbs out of bed, his muscles stiffening. He is starting to notice, these days, that he moves a little slower in the morning.

*Our little secret.*

His work is hard, physical. And it takes its toll on a body. But he also knows that he gets up slowly because he has little to look forward to. Hope has slipped from his grasp, begun to roll off him like rain on the superparched earth after a long drought. He can't soak it up. He only barely notices its presence any more.

*Flash! The cousin grins widely, an evil glint in his eye, pumps his hips once, tosses him a shirt, walks out of the room. "Get out. Now."*

The memories are coming more often these days. The flashes are more blinding. He fixes a cup of coffee, decides a shot of whiskey won't hurt, will give the coffee the jolt it needs.

*Flash! He pulls on his pants slowly, shaking. He walks out of the room. He does not look back.*

### **Narrative Conscience and the Ethnographic Adventure**

"The trouble with secrets is how they keep you separate."

—Anne D. LeClaire (2001)

### **Eruption and Response**

In any event, one cannot forever escape the intrusion of the shadow into everyday life (Zweig & Abrams, 1991). The secrets come up—in the wind, in flashes, in whispers, in torrents, in waves. And so, as I began my ethnographic journey a few years ago, memories, dreams, and secrets began to slip into my writing, first as hint and innuendo, as thin little threads of storied experience, as little uncontrolled vignettes creeping into my stories of communication in everyday life. At first, I purged these little fragments from my writing during the editing process. After all, I reasoned, even though they might be "real" or honest or important, they were only fragments anyway, and they might be, at best, self-serving and at worst, life damaging. They might put certain people, or characters in the stories (or, at least, the public "faces" of these people), at risk of humiliation or worse. And anyway, I questioned whether these little fragments of secrets seeping in really served the story. So I had better, I thought, be very clear about my motives and about the impact of what I write before I proceed along this path.

But the memories cannot be contained.

So I, as writer of ethnography, face a predicament: These stories cannot be told, but they cannot not be told!

What to do with all these memories morphing into secrets, secrets morphing into stories? How can I reverently, respectfully write these stories into life, knowing that I am exposing to the light of story many things that have lived in the shadowy crawl spaces of our collective lives? And, most important, what might this uncontained, uncontrollable, seeping, searing, flashing, torrential in-burst of memory, falling out of secret, crafted into story, do *to* or *for* those whose stories I tell?

What is the "ethical" thing to do?

Like the thin wisps and blinding flashes of memory, and the tiny, seeping-whispering secrets that grow from them, ethical questions like these are elusive yet insistent. Like particularly haunting dreams, these questions break into consciousness during the writing process, nagging and tugging at the corners of awareness, insisting on being taken into account but offering no easy or simple or neat or appropriate responses.

If we could just craft a code of ethics to cover every situation confronted in research . . . but, of course, life—like the memory and secret and story I am tracing here—is too complex for all-inclusive covering laws . . .

### **Relational Ethics and Ethnographic Research**

Ethnographers and other qualitative researchers who come into direct contact with others—especially intimate others like family members and friends—while researching human social life are faced with compelling questions of ethical responsibility. Do I reveal the secrets and stories others reveal to me? Why or why not? If so, how?

Carolyn Ellis (2007) argues for a relational ethics of care in autoethnographic and personal narrative research. A relational ethics is an ethics that raises more questions than it answers, that calls the researcher, at every turn, to search, to question, to confront self, other, and secret directly, dynamically, with heart, with care. As she puts it, “central to relational ethics is the question ‘What should I do now?’ rather than the statement ‘This is what you should do now’” (p. 4).

A relational ethics is an ethics of wonder.

Faced with revelations in the process of research, we are left with questions about how we might act in a “humane, no-exploitative way” (Ellis, 2007), while we “honor our relational responsibilities yet present our lives in a complex and truthful way for readers” (p. 17). There are no easy answers to these struggles. Each case is different, driven by different exigencies, different relationships, different purposes, different fears, different needs. But each case calls us to reach toward care. In the end, we make decisions, flawed as they may be, about how to render stories and characters and lives, about how and why and when and where to reveal matters of the heart, of the soul, of the shadow. How dare we speak or write of the pain and loss and anger and fear that may come of trauma.

Conscience, as Emmanuel Levinas (1998) points out, is a force driven by the particular face and presence of the Other who inhabits my world—in this case, the Other about whom I may write a story. Conscience is invoked by the face of the Other. Its exigencies are shaped by the case at hand, by my dynamic relationship with this Other. The possibility of a “fitting response” (Schrag, 1997, 2002) to the “call of conscience” (Hyde, 2001) is invoked as a choice by our shared human agency, endowed with the creative, coconstructive force of human communicative practice. Our communicative acts, including our storied acts, constitute our shared social reality. These are not choices to be taken lightly.

And yet, if Walter Fisher (1987) was correct in his assertion—that we humans are, fundamentally, *homo narrans*, driven by the very roots of our cobeing to tell our stories—and I think he *is* right—then I must find a way to give these stories as gifts to the world. In the stories told here, I have chosen to “thin out” the details, to tell them skeletally, so to speak, to trace the barest of bones of the stories. The stories are, like the memories and secrets out of which they are born, only *traces* of the *whole* story. I have also chosen to “fictionalize” to some extent and to leave the characters nameless.

These choices are built, in part, to protect identity and to mitigate the possibility of stigma. They are also, in part, conscience-driven responses born of my dynamic, caring relations with the particular humans in these stories. I do not wish to hurt them. Indeed, I hope by telling these stories that I can help as many people as possible to overcome the horrors that face them. I hope and believe that stories have the power to heal and to help us all move outward into the light-filled world that vibrates beyond the cold, damp, and intricately shadowy realm of pain and loss and suffering and grief and secrecy that may threaten to overwhelm us as a

result of traumas large and small. I hope that some readers at least will find some resonance in the heart of these stories, that many readers may see parts of themselves here, and that some may make different choices about how to live their lives after reading these stories. At the very least, the presence of these stories suggests a simple—albeit not an easy—healing choice that may be made in the face of trauma. Rather than secret keeping, we might do well to turn to storytelling as a means of overcoming the pain, the shame, the loss, the grief, the anger, the sadness . . .

The stories, as rendered here, are, like all stories, partial accounts of experience. In their current form, they render the problem but represent no “ease” from the “disease,” no solution or fitting response. I want to suggest, then, that the stories themselves are the beginning place for that fitting response; they provide an opening to the continuing building of a life grounded in story-weaving practice, wherein the family might well be liberated from the harboring of secrets into a life-affirming crafting, weaving, and blending of new and greater stories—stories that shed light on the shadow, stories that release the secrets, stories that smooth the floorboards in that closet of the unconscious. Stories might well be the only way to gain a footing whereby the smell of death and grief and pain—of trauma, of hurt and loss and shame and rage and dark, secret, silence—might begin to dissipate.

In a sense, these are not stories of particular people at all but of *all* of us. All families have secrets; all families feel pain and loss and trauma. If we can open our hearts to the power of story and begin to read the clues that stories offer in our quest to follow the mystery of human life, we may well transcend the dark powers that threaten to buckle our floorboards. And, in *that* sense, to tell the story may well be the *only* ethical thing to do.

### Note

1. In the high country of Colorado, where I have spent much of my life, the famed Aspen trees light up the autumn sky with their golden glory for a brief moment each year. What few people know is that a grove of Aspens an acre in size may all be parts, or offshoots, or children, if you will, of one tree standing somewhere in the grove. Indeed, the reproduction of Aspens is accomplished through rhizomatic cloning, wherein one tree sends out roots under the ground and additional trees sprout from the roots of that single tree. Tendrils reaching out through the soil, surging up from time to time to create something new, then sending new shoots downward and outward in ever more complex spirals and configurations. . . . The Aspen suggests to me a metaphor for the development and reproduction of memories, and secrets, and stories . . . relations between these three genres of experience are complex and deeply rooted—and, often, I think, may be traced back to a single source.

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