

SECRET KEEPER

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Growing up, I often wondered if I'd inherited a golden aura signifying my being a secret keeper. From a very young age my sisters, cousins, and friends would ask, "Can you keep a secret?" The innocent and shy child I was, I listened attentively and nodded in silence. There are things I remember as if it were yesterday, detail for detail. I keep the secrets archived deep down in my soul. The only entities that know about these things are the walls and my dog. Being a secret keeper does not allow one to tell. Some secrets, though, are worth the risks of telling.

When contemplating these secrets, I reflect on secrets and their meaning. Some secrets have been childlike and harmless. Others have been about serious matters and carry their own dangers. I never thought secret keeping was a harmful practice until the more serious and heavy secrets began to push to the surface. It was then that I felt a great burden on my shoulders, and what was worse, except for the wall and my dog, I had no one to tell everything that I had bottled up inside me. There was no one to help my soul with these troubles.

Throughout my growing up years, there have been major things linked to the recollection of secrets. It begins with an innocent question. "Do you remember your childhood?" If the question concerns something innocuous, like a favorite food or toy, my answer will be, "Yes." If the question depends on the memory of a particularly sensitive secret, having lived my entire life as a child charged with the special responsibility of secret keeping, these are times I simply don't answer at all.

When I was growing up, everyone in my family noticed how very mature I was for my age. Each person felt they could count on me as a confidant. Siblings and cousins naturally shared their stories and secrets. By the time I was around nine or ten, adults around me started confiding in me, trusting me with whatever problems they had. I felt I had become a therapist of sorts, taking and keeping all these mental notes about the secrets I was being told.

Sometimes I would watch my abuela make tortillas. I listened as she just talked. I would note how I would always hear her say, “Ay, Dios mio!” Maybe she was talking to God or La Virgen. It’s still not clear to me that she realized I was listening to her every word, but I was. There were times I thought I shouldn’t have been listening, such as when she held her conversations with God, but she never sent me away.

Since I was a listener by nature, talking to me was easy. My mother was like Abuela in the ways she would talk out loud in my presence and divulge her thoughts. As she drove me to school, I listened from my place in the passenger seat. Her conversation never stopped. No matter what the situation, my mother always had something to say. Even if what she was talking about had nothing to do with me, she would yell as she went on and on about various things. When we arrived at school, as I got out of the car, she warned me not tell anyone, asking if I understood: “No le vayas a decir a nadie lo que te dije...¿Entiendes?” I would roll my eyes, slam the car door, and go on my way.

Depending on what she had bellowed about, I would begin my day angry, upset, and even frustrated. However, after hearing it day after day, I soon learned not to be fazed by her talk. There were times her voice became muffled just like the schoolteacher in the *Peanuts* cartoons. Other days, I felt relieved with the knowledge that school was my sanctuary. There I gained

the only chance to be normal, to not carry a burden, even though the secrets would remain in the back of my mind and return again when I went home.

Life always brings ups and downs. The biggest secret emerged with one of my middle sisters, who at the age of fifteen became pregnant, and I, at the age of eleven, was made the first one to know. The secret brought me joy, but it also shook me to the core to think about the reaction my mother would have once she found out. My sister also feared this—and, for that reason, she trusted the first telling to me, though I was her youngest sister. When she told me, I could sense her feelings, a mixture of emotions—from scared to happy—rolling into one. She wanted me directly by her side, to be there for her, when she told our mother. Mother always had high expectations for us, and they included much more than pregnancy and motherhood. We both knew this would crush our mother. And it did.

I kept my sister's secret for about a week, before she herself finally disclosed it. I remember my father holding my mother as she cried hysterically and swore that her world had come to an end. I held her as well. When she asked if I knew, it was impossible for me to sit in silence and not answer, so I denied knowing the secret. Crying alongside her, I vowed I wouldn't do the same thing. It's not clear if I cried because I lied, or if it was the expectations that come with having a niece on the way, or if it was because of the most heavy burden I felt then as a secret keeper. Maybe it was my reputation as a secret keeper that inspired my sister to come to me, maybe it was simply because I was a sister. But I do often wonder why she would come to the younger sister, instead of the older one. I tell myself family members all have different relationships with each other, and I tend to be the one in the middle, the one that relates to everyone. I let the questions be and sat with the feeling that something within had shifted.

I remain the receiver of secrets. A few years ago, my older sister shared something with me. The relationship we have is different from that of my other sisters; we are in sync with one other. We even joke around about being each other's twin. People often ask if we are actually twins because we look very much alike, despite the eight-year gap between us. And, like many twins, we often share a certain language. The day she told me her secret we were returning to our hometown of Midland, Texas, from Hobbs, New Mexico, after having visited a curandera for a cleansing session. During the trip, we talked, sang along with the radio, and shared stories. It's not clear how it started, but I remember telling her something crazy that I had just done that I never imagined doing. She, in turn, told me an intimate secret and asked me to never tell my mother or anyone else about it.

It was a secret so personal that it caught me off-guard, and I didn't even know what to think about it. The shock of not knowing what to say resulted in a silence that must have given my sister an impression that I was not at all struck by her secret. She moved on to the next subject. As she did so, I recognized that this secret was bigger and stronger than I was, and that if it ever reached my mother, it would break her heart once again, maybe even my father's as well.

It took about a year for the secret to leak out to my mother. Not by me, but by my own sister's lips. Without uttering the exact words, she hinted to my mother about her secret. My mother is smart enough to have figured that secret out. This bothered me the most. Learning this secret has not only hurt my mother, but also the whole family. The divulging of this secret was such a selfish act, something I would have never expected from my older sister, the twin of a secret keeper. It feels as if I don't fully know her anymore. I've lost

that twin connection with her and we've fallen out of sync. But maybe that's okay, because we aren't really twins.

All the secrets and the burdens that come with them are and will always be inscribed in my body and memory. No longer the young, innocent, and shy child I once was, I am gradually losing the golden aura of the secret keeper. It is fading. I hope for it to be replaced with an aura of healing. As the carrier of secrets, I am the designated heart of the family, holding things inside me that no one else must know but that everyone needs kept.