Honesty Spree

Helen was a constant and scrupulous keeper of secrets. Doctors could have found them all over her insides, had they known what to look for, but the proper identification and extraction of secrets is almost never covered in medical school. She stored cheating on a third grade spelling test under her left eyebrow, crying at night because she was good at many things but great at none in the circles under her eyes, a brief flirtation with narcotics in the follicles of her hair, her first kiss at an eighth grade dance at the place where the lower teeth emerged from the gums, furtive eating binges in the inner flesh of her cheek, a 2:00 a.m. shriek for help that she had chosen to ignore up against her right eardrum.

It was not so bad as you might imagine. Some secrets even helped, providing a second skeleton. Her ongoing theft of lip glosses and hand sanitizers from the local pharmacy kept her spine straight. The kiss she had taken from Billy Stevens at last year’s Christmas party, in direct defiance of office policy, rolled her hunching shoulders back.

That said, anything done in excess carries with it consequences, and this was no exception. After 26 years, the oldest secrets had staled and soured. The ones in her stomach made her queasy and sour-breathed, the ones in her sinuses crushed in on her skull. The expanding secrets in her joints caused her to walk with back bent and fingers clawed, like a scuba diver who has surfaced too quickly. Eventually, they started to make her feel bloated, not so much great with secrets as gassy with them.

For several months, she endured this pain, but eventually the truth became unavoidable: some of the secrets would have to come out. She decided to start with just one, to see how it felt and what its side effects would be.

One four a.m., after several restless hours spent selecting the perfect secret (not too shocking, not too dark, but substantial all the same), she shook Jeremy awake.

“Mmmmm?” he said.

The secret was lodged just above her bottom rib. She stretched her spine out as tall as she could to give the secret space, then dug her fingers in, prying at it with her nails. When it refused to yield, she curled her right hand into a fist. She raised and lowered it slowly over the back of her left hand. “One, two, and THREE,” she whispered, slamming the fist down with all of her strength. The secret popped out, shooting through her vocal cords and out her lips on a bed of stale air: “Some days, I prefer women to men.”

“Mmmmm?” Jeremy replied, having drifted back to sleep.

So she repeated herself.

“Y’mean,” he slurried, “you love guys, but you don’t always like us?”

“No no, I think I might prefer women.” A stunned and uncomfortable silence overtook the room. “Well, I just wanted to say so. Now, go back to sleep.” And, much to Helen’s surprise, she drifted off almost immediately. Poor Jeremy had somewhat more trouble.

The next morning, Helen sprang from bed with a lightness she had never felt before. She danced around the kitchen while the coffee brewed. She hummed old show tunes while she washed her hair. On the bus, a total stranger asked what Helen used to make her skin so radiant. Helen’s first impulse was to keep the secret of secret-telling, but of course, that would wholly undermine her new approach to life. After explaining,
she caught her reflection in the bus window and was surprised to see herself glowing even more.

Helen and Jeremy had been invited to a dinner party with new friends, and when Jeremy was held up at work, Helen decided to go alone, even though she’d always been a bit of a wallflower. But telling a rapt audience about wandering drunk at 2:00 a.m. through Paris in search of her hotel, Helen felt the heaviness that had borne down on the corners of her mouth slip away and smiled more fully than she had in years.

The next morning, Helen released a secret she kept in the knuckle of her right pinky finger. She told the postman about a love letter she had almost mailed but destroyed instead, reciting from memory especially lyrical and lurid passages. On her lunch break, she told a teenaged dog walker about running over and killing a golden retriever without a collar. The dog walker cried at the story, and Helen did, too, her tears washing the gritty secret from her left eye. That evening over dinner, she told Jeremy about her high school crush, the captain of the football team, who laughed in her face when she confessed her adoration. Her heart fluttered, panicked to relive that dread combination of longing and shame, then let go its burden. That night, she and Jeremy enjoyed the best sex they’d had in months.

Secret-telling made Helen giddy, lightheaded even. Secret-telling proved so potent that she could only tell them at a rate of one an hour during evenings on the town, unless she had a designated driver. They gushed from her, marking the first time in her life that she might be deemed “effusive” rather than “taciturn” or “shy” or “aloof.” They fizzed forth with great brays of laughter or were spat with a vengeance or poured out with tears during boozy confessions, but one way or another, she disgorged more and more.

Not everyone shared Helen’s enthusiasm for these changes. Jeremy had preferred things before, but did still make an effort. One evening, Helen burst into the apartment, her eyes overbright and slightly manic laughter still rolling in her mouth, to find a ring of friends and relatives in her living room.

“Helen, please sit down,” Jeremy said, gesturing to a chair. “Now, we don’t want you to feel like we’re lecturing you, or punishing you. We’re just doing this because we care.”

“Of course, sweetie,” Helen said. She sat down, took a deep breath, and tried to calm herself, but it was no use. She felt a secret escape her tonsils. It careened repeatedly into the backs of her clenched teeth like a trapped housefly, then shot out through the gap between a lateral incisor and a canine. “I had a woman here when you were on your last work trip!”

“Helen, dear,” her mother said, “We are very concerned.”

“I lost my virginity with Adam Scott in the eleventh grade!” Helen replied, experiencing a delicious tickle as the secret wriggled free of her nether regions, “Even though you said I couldn’t date him.”

“That’s enough now, Helen,” her father said, “This really needs to stop.”

She snorted a secret clear of her nasal passage and shrieked, “Uncle Leon sold me my first ever line of coke.” No longer able to contain herself, Helen ricocheted out of her chair. “I was twenty-two. He gave it to me at a very good rate. He’s a dealer, did you know?” And, while her father glared at his brother Leon, and Uncle Leon stared at his shoes, Helen zipped around the room with secrets for each friend and family member.
Helen was kept up late that night by a stomach ache. Acting on a hunch, she pulled up her shirt in front of the bathroom mirror. Her stomach was no more toned than it had been, but it swooped in aggressively, as if she’d sucked her belly in hard. She poked it and rubbed it, to no effect. Resolved to get to the bottom of it soon, if not right then, she tossed and turned restlessly in front of late night TV.

The next morning, Helen weighed herself. She had lost three pounds.

“Everything OK?” Jeremy asked, seeing the concern on her face.

“I’m losing a little weight, is all,” Helen told him.

“Are you eating enough?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t starve myself if I tried. I could, back in high school, but then I stopped being able to do that and was eating a whole ton and wanted to throw it up only I couldn’t figure out how to get my gag reflex—”

At that, Helen heaved over. Something was escaping, and although she tried to choke it down, up and up and up it came. She retched once, twice, and then the secret surged out on a stream of stomach bile and partially digested food. “To work,” she started to say, but Jeremy held up one finger, urging silence. He closed his eyes and counted to ten then, without a word, left the apartment and did not return.

Cleaning up the mess, Helen berated herself for driving Jeremy away and for the pain that she had caused him. She could not stay sad for long, however. She was ever more fascinated with the act of turning herself inside out, offering up her inner life for strange communion with the world at large, never doubting its eagerness to partake. She was having too much fun to worry about the sudden pangs that afflicted her, or her continuous, increasingly dramatic weight loss. Finally, the pressure within her became too slight relative to that outside of her, and her body collapsed like a soda can with the air vacuumed out. One moment, she was voicing her opinions on the oedipal complex, using her own life as an example, and then with a pop and a crunch, she crushed in, bent, contorted, beyond help.

The most eminent doctors were called in. Unfortunately, no authoritative medical guide had enlightened them on the interplay of secrets and the skeletal system, and so they did not know what to say. They chalked it up to spontaneous implosion, and several would go on to write academically rigorous, if wholly fallacious, articles on the topic for the country’s top medical journals.

The funeral was an awkward affair, with the guests searching for properly dignified, consoling words when they all knew much more than they would have liked about Helen and, from Helen, about one another. Jeremy grieved guiltily, unable to fully suppress a sense of vindication. The break-up now appeared to fit into the trajectory of Helen’s self-destruction and so did not hint at any insufficiency on his part. The casket, child-sized, was lowered in silence, as Helen had managed to offend beyond redemption every priest in the county during her glorious but brief honesty spree. After an interlude of quiet contemplation, the mourners went their separate ways, each resolved to avoid Helen’s unpleasant fate and each fighting a dirty, secret envy at what she had achieved.

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