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Secrets - Flying in Silence

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CHAPTER FOUR



SECRETS

*Secret:
conducted without the knowledge of others;
kept from the knowledge of any but the initiated;
beyond ordinary human understanding.
The Macquarie Dictionary*

“Sex”, my father said, “isn’t all that it’s made out to be. People talk about it as though they know what it is. Well don’t be fooled. No one’s really an expert ... unless they’re French Canadian”. He nodded seriously, and then smiled. “Like father like son, eh?” I agreed, gulping, wondering what my mother thought of all this. For the moment she was holding her peace. My father spread the *Men’s* magazine on the table. “This, though. This isn’t sex. These are pictures. It’s not real life.”

I knew there was a moral in all this. I was hoping it would be expressed entirely in words. I’d put them on the table earlier in the day, my guilt forcing me to confess that a friend had given them to me. I was eight years old. I’d never seen such things before. One minute I was sitting quietly at the track, having just bought a pack of matches for my friend, the other he was handing over three tattered magazines. *Men’s* magazines. “Nudes”, he said, and I gave them back. “Why would I want to see naked men?” I asked, scrunching up my face. Michael looked at me confusedly. “It’s girls”, he said, “Naked women!” “Then why does it

say *Men's* magazine.” He rolled his eyes and let out a string of curses. He finished, impatiently, with a curt, “Do you want ’em or not?” He let one of them fall open at the centrefold. “Jesus,” I said. “What’s *that*?”

“You see”, Dad said reasonably, “These are images. There’s nothing here that should interest you. Not now. Later, maybe. But look. See. Two-dimensional. Just pictures. So if you want to keep these, well, son, it’s your choice. But *why* you’d want them...”

My father had a way of making something seem so unnecessary, so much beneath you, that you couldn’t possibly understand why it had ever been of any importance. When he used this tone, I thought it’d break his heart if I disagreed. And I certainly disagreed. I looked at the photograph he’d pointed out, and I feigned boredom. But my heart was pounding so hard I could barely hear him. I wanted to pull the magazine up to within an inch of my nose and scrutinise it. This, I thought for the first time in my life, was excitement. “Keep them”, I said maturely. “That’s why I gave them to you. Totally boring.”

My father nodded sagely and smiled at my mother as though to say, “You see, I told you there was no reason to panic.”

“He’ll grow up to be a sex maniac”, I heard my mother complain after I’d gone to bed, and I wondered what that meant. Did it mean reading these magazines until I went blind? Or would I go crazy and travel the streets with a meat cleaver? Anything was possible, judging from my mother’s tone. But as worried as I was, I shut my eyes and tried to recreate as many of the pictures as I could remember. They blurred into hazy images, but they never disappeared entirely. I had tasted something exhilarating, and I was hungry for more. And I hated myself for being such a goody two-shoes and giving the magazines up so readily.

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Two members of our gang lived next door. They were twins — one girl and one boy. Daniil and Daniel were the youngest of a large family. “Potential

hoodlum”, my aging aunt would say whenever she saw the girl. Danii had long blond hair and buck teeth, and as the only girl in our gang she had a rather special status, not hurt at all by my aunt’s prediction. And she became more and more central with the on-set of puberty. The gang was a rather amorphous thing — three boys and Danii — although it also included Gilbert’s little brother when it was convenient, and other members from the adjoining street when we needed to get a street hockey team together.

At about the time I discovered men’s magazines, I also discovered my libido. I realised in some vague way that Danii was the closest thing I knew to a sex object, a phrase I’d misheard on television. I referred to her as a sex object with all the seriousness of a doctor delivering a diagnosis. Gilbert nodded his head, happy for the information. We made our way to the local pool and sat in its shallows talking about sex. “It’s a burden for her”, he explained, “that’s what Mum says. Women’s lives are burdens. They have curses. So we have to respect her. And we have to kiss her a lot.” Now it was my turn to nod agreement. I always enjoyed these moments best, when we could discard the frivolity of youth and discuss the meatier issues. “Yes”, I agreed. “We have to kiss her.”

I don’t remember now how we thought this would lessen Danii’s burden, but somehow, during that warm summer, anything to do with touching and contact seemed right. And so, when Danii made her appearance at the pool, we explained to her what we had in mind. She could see the logic of this, and relieving her burden momentarily, Gilbert and I took turns kissing her in the park. It wasn’t easy. We negotiated for the first time the awkward angle of our heads, and the dangerous moment when teeth collided. Whoever wasn’t kissing had to count. This was the trickiest part because, of course, you wanted to study your rival’s technique, but if you did so you couldn’t keep your eye on the wall clock across the street. In the end I won. I lasted longest without breathing. I even beat Danii because I heard her sucking air in from the corners of her puckered mouth at about

the one minute mark. “That’s cheating”, I whispered to her confidentially, and she shrugged. “Doesn’t count for girls. Girls can breathe because they have the burden”, she said, remembering Gilbert’s argument.

Walking home towards the end of the day we agreed that kissing wasn’t very satisfactory. There was so much more to women, I explained in my learned way, detailing the photographs I had seen and pointing out that they were only two-dimensional. “What’s that?” Gilbert asked. “It means made of glossy paper. We need to see the real thing.” We looked at Danii. She stared at us without comment and kept walking. Perhaps we’d dealt with her burden enough for one day, I thought, and we let the subject drop.

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Two days later it was time for our street fair and magic show. The eight or more kids who lived on our street looked forward to this event every year. Since the age of six Gilbert and I had pooled our resources — his basement and backyard, my chemistry set — and we put on a “tombola and pageant”. The purpose of the event was financial. First the kids in the neighbourhood would pay us five cents each, and then they could play the assorted games we’d set up in the backyard. This included knocking down soda bottles, bobbing for apples, throwing a small bag of sand into a series of holes, and other taxing games.

Then, for an extra five cents, they could reassemble in the basement for the performance. Days before we had worked on our skits. Usually these consisted of brief, comic pantomines. This year we’d expanded the production and Gilbert’s six-year-old brother landed a part. The finale was a magic show, where I turned water into wine. As a Catholic, I got a peculiar *frisson* from the performance. I knew that this was what the priest did every Sunday, and I was careful to execute the procedure with as much solemnity as possible. I dropped the chemicals into the liquid I had prepared and everyone applauded as it turned bright red. Then I put the glass down behind a canopy. I was meant to swap it for a glass of cordial

concealed behind the cloth to prove that I'd made real wine. But I grabbed the wrong glass and had to smile as I swallowed a sip of the chemical concoction. Then I dropped a few more flakes into the brew and it went clear again. Even the priest, I felt reasonably certain, had never done that!

After the show Gilbert, Alan and myself counted our money. We sat in the solemn coolness of the basement and congratulated ourselves. One dollar. Our best year yet. As we talked about expanding the show, we heard a noise and looked up. Danii had wandered down the stairs and was standing coyly in the shadows. "The show's over", Gilbert said harshly, not wanting to share the glory. Danii just nodded and hovered around the door. He turned away in annoyance, and then changed his mind. He called her over. "If you want to stay here backstage you have to take your clothes off." She looked at us with a hurt expression, and I was about to protest, when I noticed her nod. I heard six-year-old Alan wimper, but I kept my eyes on Danii. My mouth was dry and my heart started to pound again, and I wondered if I was becoming a sex maniac. Was this what had happened in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*?

Gilbert was matter-of-fact. "All your clothes", he said. Danii didn't say a word. Then she took off her top and shorts, so that she was standing bare-chested, wearing only her underwear. Gilbert pointed at them and she took them off. "Can I have a soft drink?" she said, and Gilbert answered, "Only if we can kiss them". He pointed to her small, flat nipples, and then down at her bare mound. "One, two, three", he counted, pointing at each in turn. "Then you can have my soda." Danii didn't move. She was staring us down. "Who goes first?" she said. Without saying anything else, Gilbert stood and gave her a peck on each part of her body he had mentioned. I did the same, but barely remember doing it. Just that my head hurt from the pounding in my chest. "What about *him*?" Danii asked, pointing at Alan. Alan shook his head furiously. He was eying the door and Gilbert moved to block his path. "If he doesn't do it he'll blabber to my Mum." He grabbed Alan's arm

and said, “If you want to be in the show next year, you better do it.” Alan stared nervously, and then with a speed that surprised me, he pecked away at Danii’s body and then fled the room. Danii put her clothes back on and grabbed Gilbert’s drink.

What amazed me about Gilbert was that he never seemed to think about the event again. He spoke to Danii as though nothing had changed. He went to the pool with her and he played on the monkey bars. But he never even tried to kiss her after that. I, on the other hand, became obsessed. I wondered how Gilbert could do what he did — could conceive of asking her to strip — and then forget it. I thought about it all the time. Even, in high school, when the class beauty had lent me a book of hers without realising she’d left an explicit note in it to her sister about what she’d done the night before with her boyfriend, I thought of Gilbert’s tone. I fantasized about withholding the note. “If you want it, take your clothes off. Or I’ll send it to your parents.” In reality, of course, I handed it back, and dwelled on her deep blush as though she had temporarily been mine.

From the day I touched Danii’s naked body I dreamed of doing it again.

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In the backyard my father had built a small cubbyhouse for me. It had two small windows, was painted white and blue, and was fitted inside with chairs and tables. It became for a while a gathering place for the gang. One day, when Danii and her brother were over, she suggested that we should play punishments. I wasn’t sure what she meant.

“You have to pull my pants down”, she said, “and spank me.”

I looked over at her brother. He didn’t seem to object. Alan was sitting in the corner and had started his familiar wimper. But he didn’t say a word. We grabbed some newspaper and taped it over the windows, and then shut the door. I turned my chair away from the table and Danii pulled her pants down and lay across my lap. “You have to put your hand in there”, Daniel said, his voice cold and solid

like a stone. “Between hits. That’s how punishments work”, he said sharply. “What are you waiting for?” As I started to spank her the door opened and my father, smiling jovially, looked in. “How’s the gang today...?” he said, before swallowing his words. Danii leapt off me and pulled her pants up. He stood back and pointed angrily towards their house. “Get out!” he bellowed, “I won’t have that behaviour here.” Alan, miraculously, squeezed past everyone and headed home first in a display of speed which became his trademark in later years. He was quickly followed by Danii and Daniel.

I sat there looking up at my father, convinced that he now thought me a sex maniac. “Take the newspapers off the windows and come in the house”, he said, before turning and shutting the door. I was sent to my room early and nothing else was said. Somehow it was worse than being yelled at. In the morning my father took me aside and told me, in his serious voice, “You don’t want people to think bad of you. That sort of behaviour, it’s just not right. Do you understand?”

I nodded, relieved that that was all there was to it. Later in the week, when I met Danii again, we were too shy to look at each other. “What did he say?” she asked me, staring at her feet. “Did he give you punishments?” I shook my head and told her what my father had said. “You’re lucky”, she whispered. “My father always gives me punishments.”

“It’s the woman’s burden”, I told her seriously, remembering Gilbert’s theory. She started to cry. “Then I don’t want to be a girl any more”, she whispered. I gave her a hug and we sat on the wall near the swimming pool. It was moving towards autumn and the pool was empty. It was already too cold to sit around without a jacket. I could hear her sobbing, but I didn’t know what else to do. After a time she calmed down and wiped her eyes. “Besides”, she said, as though there hadn’t been a break in our conversation, “sometimes Daniel gets punishments too. So it’s not just girls. But it’s mostly me.”

I looked up along the rough concrete of the swimming pool, and at the lion's head statue and its stone mouth, through which the water poured. Once I'd scooped a dead bee from the water just beneath the spout. I pocketed it and walked away, remembering how I had watched it struggle for what seemed to be hours, wanting to rescue it, but too afraid to touch. Later, on the swings, I thrust my hand into my jacket and pulled the insect out to show Gilbert. When we looked into my palm the bee was twisting lethargically. I screamed and dropped it in the sand, and then I stomped on it. I was so angry it was beyond description. My foot just kept pounding the insect until there was virtually nothing left of it except my hatred and fear.

That was how I felt as I held Danii's hand, in the shadows of the change room. But I didn't know what I was angry about. I remembered my uncle, once, grabbing my fingers and twisting them back until I thought they would break. I hated the way he had got to me in the first place, with his voice of reason and maturity. "Come here a minute, boy. I want to teach you something." And then he'd grabbed my fingers. "You see, don't ever let anyone do this to you. There's no way to get out of it." I thought of smashing my knee in his groin the way we did in the schoolyard whenever someone was stupid enough to try this. But he was an adult; he was my godfather and my mother was in the other room. "Say uncle", he said, rolling his tongue across his lips and pulling me towards him, forcing me down. But I wouldn't let him win. I looked into his eyes which had turned glassy and distant. "Say it, boy!" He pushed my face into his groin just by twisting my fingers, and it wasn't until I heard my mother saying, in her clear, light voice, "For God's sake, Drew, don't hurt him", that he let go. I straightened up, and I could tell he was annoyed that I hadn't said a word. "Next time, boy", he said cryptically, and I had nothing to say. But the rage I felt was choking me.

Danii and I walked up along the highway until we got to the train tracks and then followed them back towards our place. We picked up pebbles and placed

them on the track like little rows of soldiers. Eventually we got to the spot where Michael had given me his magazines. Michael who wagged school virtually every day; who showed up in class with dark purple bruises on his face like extraordinary flowers. He would send me into his local store because even at ten years old he looked too mean to be trusted. I used to ask for matches “for my mother”, and they’d give me the matchbook without question. And then I’d pass them on to Michael.

Only once did someone refuse me. A short, squat woman behind the counter stared and said, “You’re lying”. I remember I was so outraged that she had said that that I forgot I really was lying. I was on the verge of asking her to call my mother to confirm it when the woman’s husband, who usually served me, entered from the back of the shop. “Hey, how’s your Mom?” he said, automatically flicking me a matchbook. I stared at the woman with eyes to kill — such a sense of indignation even in the face of falsehood. I marched out of the store triumphantly, ignoring the argument that was breaking out behind me. I heard her say, “If it was really for his mother he wouldn’t have said, ‘It’s for my mother’. Not without me asking first. Sometimes you’re so gullible.”

We sat down on the tracks and watched the long tall grass bend in the wind. Danii picked up a handful of pebbles and threw them at a No Parking sign. “I hate this place”, she said. “There’s nothing to do.”

“There’s school”, I said. “That’s something.”

She shook her head. “No. My father says I have to stay home to clean up ’cause Mum goes to work. But mostly all we do is punishments. So I’m always wagging.”

We sat there in the growing darkness. Once we felt the rumbling of the tracks and retreated down the gravel bank. We watched the train fly past us, crushing our pebbled soldiers beneath its lethal wheels. We stood with our hands pressed over our ears until the train was long gone.

“Look”, Danii said to me. She pointed at her chest. I couldn’t see anything. “Look!” I moved in closer but I didn’t know what I was looking for. She let out an exasperated breath. “My breasts”, she said. “I’m starting to grow breasts.” She took my finger and poked herself firmly on the chest. “See.” I nodded even though I couldn’t see a thing. “Even my Dad says I’m becoming a woman now.”

I didn’t know what to say. She seemed to be expecting me to make a comment. I shrugged. “You’re very ... three-dimensional”, I said at last. She smiled then, radiantly. As we walked home that night we felt as though we’d exchanged an important secret. We let our fingers tangle together until we got to our block and then slowly moved apart. It was the beginning of a distance between us that I never understood. I longed to be with her, but she became increasingly removed, rarely accompanying her brother to our gang meetings. And then she virtually disappeared. Sometimes you could see her behind the curtains of the livingroom staring out into the street. If you caught her eye the curtain would float down, but its effect was like a slamming door, cutting her off. And somehow I wasn’t surprised, years later, when I saw her bundled into a car and driven away. Her stomach, it seemed to me, had grown enormously, and I remember thinking how extraordinary it was that she could ever have grown so fat.

“She’s gone to live with my aunt”, Daniel explained when I quizzed him about it the next day, “Up north”.

“Where?” I said, studying his puffy face, the bruises not unlike Michael’s purple garden. “When will she be back?”

Daniel shrugged. “It’s a secret”, he said. “But Mum says she deserves it.” And then he walked away.