

The First Lie by Jill Quist

To keep your own secrets is wisdom; but to expect others to keep them is folly.
- William Scott Downey, *Proverbs*

I could never keep a secret.

It always seemed to me like sharing the secret was part of the point. There was power in knowing something that others did not. Nobody knew you had the power if you didn't tell the secret, right? Where would be the fun in silence?

In this case, the secret was that we were going to play hooky from school on Friday so that we could go to the 1964 New York World's Fair in Flushing Meadows, Queens. It was my father's idea to visit the fair on a school day to avoid the weekend crowds and long lines. We were not to tell anybody, because "to tell even one person was to tell them all," he said.

"This will be our little secret, ok? Jill, that means you can't even tell Sassy. Do you understand?" Dad asked.

My brothers' heads swiveled in unison from our dad to me, as if they were watching a tennis match.

Sassy was my best friend, and we shared everything. Even though I nodded "yes" to Dad, I didn't for one second believe that Sassy would not keep my secret. Sharing our most intimate secrets with each other was what we did. It's what made us best friends.

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We started out early in the morning to go to the fair. As always, I was forced to ride between my two brothers in our yellow and white Ford Country Squire station wagon. Both of my parents

were chain smokers, with my mother often lighting my father's cigarette using the end of her own, creating a constant cycle of smoking pleasure and a perpetually nauseating car interior for us children.

Thank goodness it was springtime, so the car windows were open.

My mother often drove with a lead foot, steadily increasing the speed of the vehicle, but maintaining a smooth ride. By contrast, my father drove more slowly but applied uneven pressure to the accelerator. His rhythm was fast/slow, fast/slow, creating the rocking motion reminiscent of boat rides that regrettably resulted in the same nauseating motion sickness for me. Unfortunately, on the day of the World's Fair, my father was driving.

Because I always sat in the middle of the back seat, the inevitable occurred after one too many cigarettes had been smoked and the rocking motions had started churning my stomach acids, I groaned, "I'm gonna be sick."

"Oh Lord!" Mom said urgently. "Bill, pull over. Jill's going to be sick."

"Joanne, there's no shoulder on the road. I can't pull over."

I scrambled into the back of the car to puke out the rear window.

Not missing a beat, Dad shouted, "No, Jill. No. Downwind, downwind. Go to Geoff or Mark's window!"

Mom shouted, "Jill, Mark's window! Bill, the kids don't understand expressions like downwind."

Dad said, "Well, they should. They've been on enough boat rides. They've been seasick often enough. They've experienced what happens when they vomit upwind."

I scrambled back from the rear of the car, looking at my brothers for guidance. Both were making faces of disgust and signaling for me to go to the other's window. Unable to hold it any longer, I crawled across Mark's lap until I reached his downwind window. I climbed towards the opening and stood on the seat while Mark held me around the waist, and I puked my guts out.

The boys cried in unison, "Ohhh, gross!"

Mom fumbled around in her purse for a clean tissue. "Oh sweetie, what did you eat this morning?" She asked as she passed the tissue.

"Cocoa Puffs," I said.

Dad said, "No more Cocoa Puffs for you, doll!"

The boys and I looked at each other knowingly, while they mimed the grown-ups smoking their cigarettes. We all knew that Cocoa Puffs had nothing to do with my stomach upset.

Dad said, "I hope you were upwind enough to miss the car. I just washed it yesterday."

"I missed it, Dad." All I wanted was to lie down and sleep. The inherent violence of vomiting was exhausting. I was wrung out from the experience.

Mark said, "Can't you go lie down in the back. You smell like puke."

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The only exhibit I remember from the World's Fair was the Small World exhibit, shipped by Disney's studio in Burbank, CA and housed in the UNICEF pavilion. The ride featured over 300 animated life-sized dolls in the traditional costumes of the countries they represented. They sang the treacly "It's a Small World" song that sounded like something from a wind-up jewelry box. I collected dolls at that time and loved their exotic, foreign costumes. Before we left the fair, my parents bought

me a way-too-expensive, souvenir doll. I had a hard time choosing which one I liked the best. I watched my father pull back his shirt cuff and look at his watch before saying, "Joanne, we're going to hit rush hour if we don't leave soon. I don't want to hit rush hour on a Friday afternoon." I saw my father's jaw clenching, because I was taking too long, so I quickly selected a Japanese doll in a beautiful red kimono. I absolutely loved it.

For the trip home, I asked if I could sit in the front seat. My parents took mercy on me because of my earlier carsickness. I leaned against the warmth of my mother, and she wrapped her arm around me. With her free hand, she stroked my hair. I felt snug and cozy. I held my doll in my lap, petting the satin costume. I sang the final verse of the "Small World" song the whole way home. My brothers joined me. "It's a small world after all...It's a small, small world." My father's jaw started clenching again. He hated rounds. He hated kid stuff in general, and probably would have been happier if we'd all been born at eighteen, when he could have skipped over the kid stuff and gone right to adult conversations. I could tell that he was ready to tell us to stop, but my mother reached across me, held the wrist of his driving arm, and quietly said, "We had a great day. They're happy. Let them sing their song."

He let us sing. His jaw relaxed. My mother returned to stroking my hair. I went back to petting my doll's satin kimono.

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It wasn't long after our outing that the school principal, a nun named Sister Thaddeus, called our parents to report that our secret was out. It was the buzz of the entire school. Word had gone back from students to their parents that we had skipped school to see the World's Fair. Outraged parents

called her to complain that Geoff, Jill and Mark Loftus were playing hooky, and we should be disciplined. Although I could only hear my mother's side of their discussion, I imagine the whole conversation went something like this:

"Normally, I wouldn't interfere with parenting decisions," Sr. Thaddeus would have said, "but I wonder what message it gave to your children when you called to say they were sick, and then sent a follow-up 'sick' note to me explaining that they had missed school because they had sore throats. All of them. Together. Hmmm? It was bad enough to play hooky, but to lie about it, involving all of them...wasn't that adding insult to injury?"

My mother agreed that it probably was.

Sister Thaddeus wasn't done admonishing my mother. "Sending that note was a bit like telling the children it's acceptable to lie, don't you agree?"

My mother said, "I do apologize Sister, but surely, we are talking about a misdemeanor, not a felony, here. Or in the language of us Catholics, a venial rather than a mortal sin. That would be a conversation for the confessional, not a phone call with the school principal."

Way to go, Mom!

Yes, of course, the principal could understand and yes, of course she realized that it was a misdemeanor, not a felony crime, but "You can see what a pickle this has put me in."

My mother was profusely apologetic, swore it would never happen again, and blah, blah, blah.

Finally, Sr. Thaddeus asked, "But you must tell me, Mrs. Loftus, was the Fair as wonderful as they've been saying?"

My parents later asked us which of us had let the secret out. I confessed that it was me. I told Sassy. Whereupon my younger brother, Mark, piped up that he also told his best friend, Jimmy Dempsey. Not surprisingly, my older brother, Geoff, had not told a soul. He always did as my parents instructed.

Initially, my parents rationalized their behavior, saying how these had been white lies. They were necessary, as it was unlikely the school would have blessed our outing if we'd told them our true plans. But they quickly backed down after that call, acknowledging that what they'd done was wrong. It was wrong to lie, and it was wrong to have involved us kids. They even apologized to us. My parents were good that way.

I asked if a white lie was the same as a venial sin and if they planned to confess it to Father Farley on Saturday.

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Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew my parents wouldn't have second-guessed themselves if we hadn't been caught by Sr. Thaddeus. They wouldn't have said we'd done something wrong. They wouldn't have admitted to telling a lie or apologized to us. They'd be celebrating that we got away with it. They'd be toasting the success of the caper over cocktails and canapes, reviewing their favorite fair exhibits with each other.

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Looking back, it was my father who taught me about lying. He taught me how to lie, when to lie, and why, as well as the risks and benefits of lying. Possibly most important, he taught me how to

rationalize lying and make it seem right. My father could construct a seemingly logical argument to justify any action after the fact.

His lessons were nuanced. From observing him, I learned that sometimes we lie because the stakes are too high to tell the truth. Sometimes we lie to get what we want because lying is the only way to get it. Sometimes we lie simply to embellish a story and make it better than the original.

What I learned from my mother was how to keep secrets, her own and my father's, often by denying the truth to herself and others. She wanted to protect my father and the image they had created of a happy marriage, which wasn't very happy. We learned to keep things hidden because telling the secret might hurt our loved ones whom we wanted to protect.

My parents danced the dance of secrets and lies from the day they were engaged until the day they divorced, pretending to have an ideal marriage and a model home when they had anything but. Sometimes, on my way to get a glass of water after bedtime, I saw my mother crying in the dark. She sat watching television, lights out, by herself, probably unaware of what she was watching, also unaware that she was being watched. She told us that Dad wouldn't be home for dinner, but what she really meant was that he wouldn't be home tonight. Other times, Dad missed parent-teacher meetings and school plays. He said he had to work late, but when he came home, he didn't walk straight, and his breath smelled of gin.

We kids learned the dance with them, me by standing on my dad's feet while he waltzed, my brothers by gliding around my mother in reverse turns.

What I learned from the 1964 World's Fair was that it was okay for my parents to tell lies, but it was not okay for us kids. And I learned that sometimes, when lies are disguised as "our little secrets,"

we should keep them to ourselves. Even though I'm not good at keeping secrets, telling others only gets you caught. Above all else, I learned if one is going to lie, one needs to become good at it. Mastery is everything. One must never get caught in a lie.

Jill Quist is a writer, editor, and writing coach. She earned her BA in Creative Writing from New York University. Her recent work has been published in HerStry, Minerva Rising Press, and Mud Season Review. When she is not writing, she loves spending time with her family traveling wherever their wanderlust takes them.