

## **Silence and Secret-keeping in a Small Alaska Town**

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In late 2017 a friend gave me a copy of Terri Jentz's "Strange Piece of Paradise," a book that was published in 2006. Some people believe that a book finds its perfect reader at the perfect time. That's how I felt after reading "Strange Piece of Paradise," because it is a story of secret keeping and collusion in a small town.

In 1977, while camping in their tent at Cline Falls near Redmond, Oregon, Terri and her friend Shayna Weiss were attacked with an ax after the perpetrator used his truck as a weapon to run over them. Both women survived. Shayna awoke with no memory of the attack while Terri was able to give a detailed description of the "meticulous cowboy" from the waist down. No one was ever arrested. Fifteen years later Terri returned to Central Oregon to find her attacker. What she stumbled upon is a community that colluded in allowing the perpetrator to walk among them, a topic that made me question my own secret keeping and collusion.

Why do people look the other way, collude in ways — small and big — that cause injustice, pain, and even death? Why did the people of Redmond ignore Terri's statements and the subsequent investigation back in 1977 when the evidence clearly pointed to the violent young man who perpetrated the crime? Why did the people of Haines, Alaska name the high school gymnasium after a man whispered to abuse students? Did anyone at the school know? Did parents know? Did his family know?

On June 1, 2000 I arrived in the small town of Haines in Southeast Alaska where I rented a studio apartment above the hardware store on Main Street. By summer's end I bought a 576 square foot unfinished cabin on an acre of land in a quiet neighborhood about a mile from downtown. After 25 years of living in rented apartments I was going to be a homeowner and turn a

24'x24' square with a half loft into my dream home. Luckily, I was a complete neophyte. I didn't know a floor joist from a wall stud but I had friends who were architects and carpenters and they encouraged me to go for it. Unfortunately, they now lived 2500 miles away. One of my first misadventures as a homeowner was to discover that the fall rains deposited two feet of standing water beneath my cabin. It was dry when I met with the inspector in August and signed the papers. When I went to the hardware store to buy a sump pump, the local master carpenter said that the original owner probably didn't dig the French drain deep enough. French drain? What's that? Who can I hire to fix it? And that's when I learned the secret.

When the man recommended to fix my French drain arrived to assess the situation he told me tales about the man who had built the cabin I purchased. That he was once a boxer and a logger, that he smoked a lot of pot, that he had never built a house before. It was not comforting. He then told me that he couldn't use equipment to re-dig the French drain; it would have to be done by hand. Although digging a French drain was not on my bucket list, I was not averse to a little digging. And dig we did. Because the weather wasn't always cooperative and because our middle-aged bodies needed breaks, we didn't dig every day, and a project that should have taken days took weeks.

The man remedying my French drain was a "local," a person who grew up here. Like many of the locals he was once a fisherman. He had also purchased real estate, and when the time was right, he sub-divided. In fact, the land on which my unfinished cabin was built was once his property. After the Valdez oil spill he ended his fishing career, bought a bulldozer and started moving earth.

The earth is always moving and people are always keeping secrets. What circumstances create the moment when a secret is shared? Is it the topic of conversation, a recent report in the news, the theme of a book or play or movie? A threat? A death? A shovel hits the earth and a secret is spoken. I cannot recall our conversation. Maybe I was talking about my experiences

teaching. Maybe he was talking about attending the local school. But sometime between digging the French drain and conversing about our lives and experiences he told me about the man whose name was on the school gym. “As soon as his wife dies I’m taking down that sign and burning it.” Like so many others in this small Southeast Alaska town I became a secret-keeper, a secret I did not want to keep.

Keeping someone else’s secret is different than keeping one’s own. A friend at work tells you she’s pregnant and not to tell anyone. A long-time friend reveals that she, like the children in the news, was molested by a Bishop when she was 10 years old. Another friend never invites you to his house because “My dad beats my mom” or because “My parents are alcoholics.” Our hearts become filled with secrets we would rather not hold. “My cousin molested me.” “I had four abortions.” “His real father is his father’s brother.” “My best friend’s grandfather molested me.” “My mother was a heroin addict and would leave us alone at night when we were really little.” “My step-father raped me.”

For 18 years I knew the secret, but so did other people. Like the people of Redmond who were highly certain they knew the identity of the person who attacked Terri Jentz and her friend Shayna Weiss on that long ago night in 1977, it takes the courage of one voice to set the secret free.

On March 11, 2018, in a video made for his wife and family, this long-held local secret was spoken by 60-year-old Rick Martin before he killed himself. However, it was the courage of his wife and family to release the truth to the community, airing first on the local radio station KHNS on April 2.

More than 40 years ago a Haines High School student was raped by a trusted member of the community, by a man who was a Boy Scout leader, a school principal and superintendent, by a man who died in 1997 and whose widow is still alive. His name was Karl Ward.

Do you think his wife knew? This is the question that ultimately arises in every conversation. Some believe she did, absolutely. Others are adamant

that she was completely unaware of her husband's proclivities. Yet others are not so sure. After I learned the secret I was hesitant to meet his wife. But meeting her was inevitable given that I worked in the library and she was a frequent patron. I immediately liked her even if my brain associated her with a secret about a husband whispered to sexually molest young boys. Over the years other people talked to me about the man whose name is on the school gym. When I asked a friend why she didn't come forward at the time, she said "It wasn't my secret to tell." And she, like most everyone else who knew, spoke of protecting the secret until his wife dies.

Protecting someone else. Isn't this why we often keep a secret? Some psychologists refer to the unknowing wife and children of child abusers as "secondary victims." When a prominent person is accused, doesn't a whole community become secondary victims? Did Meryl Streep know about Harvey Weinstein? Do we stop watching Woody Allen movies and ban his books? Do we burn all of Israel Horowitz's plays? Do we stop laughing at Louis C.K.'s humor? And how do we live with ourselves when Donald Trump, President of the United States, believes he has the right to behave as if any woman's pussy is up for grabs?

When I was a freshman in high school I flew from Oakland to Burbank, California, to spend spring break with my much beloved fifth grade teacher. She and her husband had become friends of my family and had moved to the Los Angeles area so her husband could pursue his career as an opera singer. She was still teaching fifth grade, she was six-months pregnant with their first child, and her husband was performing the role of Marcello in "La Boheme." They were a very attractive couple in their mid-30s, educated, cultured, musical. She had been my chorus teacher and had encouraged my singing. When I was in fifth grade she selected me to perform the song "Where is Love?" from the musical "Oliver" at the annual spring concert. I adored her and I thought her husband was very handsome — until he became ugly.

On the Monday night just three days into my visit she left to attend a voice lesson, leaving me alone with her husband. We were sitting at the piano. What song we were playing I cannot remember. “Heart and Soul?” Before I could process what was happening, his arm was around me and his hand was snaking down my pants. So many things went through my mind, most of all what do I do. I ran into the bathroom and locked the door. For the remaining five days of my visit I felt trapped. For some reason asking to go home wasn’t an option. I wanted to tell my beloved teacher but I didn’t want to hurt her, and she was pregnant. So the husband and I played as if the incident didn’t occur. I stayed polite to him but didn’t engage. Yet beneath my performance was rage and confusion, sadness and loneliness. There was no one to talk to. And who would believe me? The Me Too and Time’s Up movements were 47 years in the future. I was also certain his sexual attention toward me was not an isolated incident. He’d done this before.

I have often wondered how the life of my teacher-friend would have changed had I told her what happened. Would she have believed me? Could I have prevented the hurt and humiliation she experienced two years later when her husband left her for a 17-year-old adolescent? Were others harmed by my silence? After the reports of the allegations against former superintendent Karl Ward became national news, another one of his victims, Craig Loomis, came forward: “God I feel so sorry. I should have said something 30 or 40 years ago. Whoever’s been suffering, we don’t know what their life would have been if we would have said something.” A sentiment reinforced by Ward’s widow in the April 5, 2018 edition of the Chilkat Valley News: “She is in shock and in mourning for a life she thought she had.”

In 1978 during my sophomore year in college, the novel “Lolita” by Vladimir Nabokov entered my life. I wish I could remember if I was aware of the novel and its story. I do remember that one of the students, who was a minister, refused to read it. I was surprised when the professor respected the student’s position and assigned him a different book; she did not exempt him from missing class discussions, however. He eventually dropped the class.

“Lolita” is the story of a murderer and a pedophile whose command of the English language to tell his story almost makes the reader believe that he is narrating a tragic love story about a man called Humbert Humbert and a 12 year-old girl he calls Lolita. The opening sentences live in my synapses: “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta . . . .” This is the novel that introduced me to what Wayne C. Booth named in his 1961 book “The Rhetoric of Fiction” as the unreliable narrator. Beware, dear reader, the narrator is not what he seems. This is the book that sent me on a journey to learn all I could about pedophilia.

Human beings, unfortunately, are not born with handbooks, especially when it comes to sexual behavior. When I set about researching pedophilia, one of the books I found in the library’s catalog at Ohlone Community College was Krafft-Ebing’s “Psychopathia Sexualis.” Until reading this book I did not know that a baby can be raped. I did not know that in Ancient Greece adult males took young males, usually in their teens, as lovers. I did not know a lot of things. I was 20 years old and still a virgin. I did not know that girls as young as 10 could become brides, that in the late 1880s in America the age of consent in the state of Delaware was seven, three years younger than other states. After researching this topic I remember thinking that I never want to read about sexual behavior again. What I most remember is my conclusion: that when adults engage children in sexual relationships it is an abuse of power, even when the adults claim they are acting lovingly and in the child’s best interests.

From “The Fear of Women” by Wolfgang Lederer, M.D., I also learned that a culture establishes its own set of sexual practices and norms. Monogamy. Polygamy. Polyandry. Heterosexuality. Homosexuality. Bisexuality. Female genital mutilation. Circumcision. Chinese foot binding. Young men performing fellatio on adult males to drink semen as a ritual to becoming a man. Fathers having sexual relations with their daughters to initiate them into womanhood. Age of Consent. In the United States we use age of consent to govern when an individual is considered legally old enough to consent to sexual activity. For example, the current age of consent in Alaska

is 16 years old. Therefore, if an individual aged 15 or younger consents to sexual activity, such activity may result in prosecution for statutory rape. Alaska statutory rape law is violated when an individual over age 16 has sexual intercourse with a person under 16 who is at least three years younger than the offender. ***The age of consent does not apply if the perpetrator is in a position of authority.***

When a person of authority, a trusted member of a community, abuses their power and is accused of sexually abusing minors, lives are turned inside out. Conversations that have long been whispered surface. Questions that have only been spoken among secret-keepers find new tongues. Did parents know? What about colleagues? Did the family know? While taking a drama class, Sam Shepard's "Buried Child" was assigned. During the discussion one of my classmates raised the topic of incest between the mother and the son. I was stunned. I'd missed the signs. And this is why: ***You cannot see what you cannot imagine.***

Within days of Rick Martin's admission, the earth shifted. The sign with the former school superintendent's name was removed from the Haines High School gym. Within weeks more victims came forward, victims who had told their parents, victims who had confided in a teacher, victims who had warned others, and victims who had remained silent. If only it would be as easy to excise Karl Ward's name from the souls of his victims and the silence of the secret keepers.

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