



MY LITTLE

WE ALL HAVE THEM: UNTOLD TRUTHS WE HOLD DEEP INSIDE FOR FEAR OF THE CONSEQUENCES. BUT IN THE END, EVERYONE SUFFERS. THROUGH HER OWN PERSONAL STRUGGLE, ESSENCE SENIOR WRITER **JEANNINE AMBER** EXPLORES WHY WE TRY SO HARD TO HIDE OUR SECRETS FROM OTHERS AND REVEALS HOW WE CAN FINALLY BREAK FREE

You know the type of woman who'll tell a complete stranger everything about her date, her doctor's appointment, her fight with her dad? Well, I'm that woman. I've never been accused of being secretive. I'm open and chatty and love to confess. Everything. To anyone. All the time. My brother routinely declares that I have zero discretion, but it's the way I've always been. That's what makes my current situation all the more perplexing. You see, for years, even though I know it's wrong, I've been keeping a life-changing secret from the person I love most in the world. And I'm just starting to figure out why.

Six years ago I had a daughter. My child's father has two sons by two other women. I've never told my daughter she has brothers—never even come close. Instead, as she's grown older, I've gone to greater and greater lengths to keep this from her, never leaving her alone with someone I think might reveal my omission, quickly changing the topic the few times she's asked outright if her dad has other kids. Under the weight of trying to guard this information, I've become a woman outside of myself: a secret keeper, a liar, a sneak.

There's not a woman I know who doesn't have a secret. I have friends who've hidden the fact that they tried drugs, had more than one abortion, never graduated from college. I know a woman who slept with her best friend's man and another who routinely gets tipsy locked in her office at the end of the day. I know of a woman living with her female lover while her whole family thinks she's straight, and a successful filmmaker who once allowed a stranger to pay her for sex. I have a friend who married an inmate and didn't tell her parents for two years and another friend who lost her job and kept it from her man for weeks, getting dressed every morning as if she had somewhere to go.

We all keep secrets—from our children, our parents, our mates, our friends, our coworkers—and sometimes that's not such a bad thing. Does your brand-new boyfriend really need to know how many lovers you've had? Other secrets are born of shame, regret and embarrassment, and most of the time these are exactly the secrets that shouldn't be kept. >

BRAD WILSON/GETTY IMAGES

MY LITTLE SECRET

AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH

I

have tried to tell myself it's no big deal. My little girl's brothers live far away, and do I really want to reach out to their mothers anyway? But in my more honest moments I know these boys are her family. Eventually she's going to find out they exist. And when she does, I'm sure she's going to look at me with a raised eyebrow and think, *Why would you keep this from me?*

This type of secret certainly isn't that unusual in African-American families. We've all heard the whispers about so-and-so's infidelity, children on the side, grandparents posing as parents. "Our secrets tend to center around sexuality and relationships," says Kumea Shorter-Gooden, Ph.D., coauthor of *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America* (Harper Perennial). "This is especially true of relationships that were not approved of by the family or the church, and the children that come from those relationships."

But family secrets, no matter how pervasive, are not without their consequences. Just ask a woman I'll call Erika*. For her entire childhood, Erika, a 38-year-old medical researcher, ached for any scrap of information she could gather about her father. But her mother's stony silence made it clear the topic was off-limits. "My mother kept everything about him a secret," she says. "I didn't know where he lived or if he had another family or if he liked sports or hated snakes or anything about him. My mother is very different from me; she's opinionated and strong-willed and I'm more reticent. I thought if I knew more about my father it might help me accept myself more."

Of course, many of us keep information from our children. According to Harriett Lerner, Ph.D., author of the groundbreaking book *The Dance of Anger: A Woman's Guide to Changing the Patterns of Intimate Relationships* (Harper), parents make daily decisions about what information to share with their children, and how and when to share it. "Mothers withhold information because they think the timing is wrong, the kids need to be a little older, or they want to protect the child from painful facts," says Lerner. "I certainly respect the need for secrecy at a particular point in family life. But it's been my experience that family members do better when they can speak openly about things that really matter. Secrets come with a price tag."

And when the information is as fundamental as where a child comes from, the cost can be enormous. "Withholding information from someone close to you—information that would make a difference in their lives, that would affect their understanding of themselves in the world—can cause tremendous resentment and

alienation," says Shorter-Gooden. "When one does that to one's own child, it can be experienced by the child as a serious betrayal."

A few years ago, in an attempt to get her mother to open up, Erika gave her a poem she had written mourning her father's absence. She wrote: *My father's name was taboo in our house/ But I never stopped missing him. "My mom just handed it back to me and said 'Nice poem,'" Erika recalls. "I was so angry and hurt. All I wanted to know was that I mattered in my father's life."* But it wasn't until an aunt told her that her father died in 2002 that Erika finally found the courage to approach other relatives and piece the story together. In talking to her aunt, she discovered that her mother had been 17 when Erika was born and her father 19 years older, married and with children. "It sort of explained why my mother never told me," Erika says now. "I think she was ashamed."

Shame is one of the most compelling reasons Black women keep secrets, says Tricia Rose, Ph.D., author of *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk About Sexuality and Intimacy* (Picador). The reason, she says, is that our behavior is routinely judged against the most negative stereotypes: oversexed, irresponsible, unable to keep a man. "We have been the poster children for deficient motherhood, deficient family structure, hypersexuality," explains Rose, who specializes in African-American culture and gender issues at Brown University. "We sense our human frailties will be seen through the lens of these stigmas, and we fear that we won't be judged as individuals who might be struggling just like anyone else."

SHE'LL NEVER TELL

M

My friend Joan, 43, is an artist who's been in a happy, loving relationship with her husband for 18 years. Even so, she's never told him that she'd had four abortions before they began dating. "I thought

it would make him question my morals," says the mother of three. "So I told him I'd had one abortion before we met and left it at that."

After the couple got married, Joan became pregnant. As she and her husband sat in the doctor's office going over their medical histories, the physician asked if she'd ever had an abortion. "I said yes and then she asked how many and I froze," recalls Joan. Torn between keeping her secret and the fear that not telling her doctor the truth might jeopardize her unborn child, Joan admitted to three abortions, omitting the last—the one she'd had shortly before meeting her husband. "I was still with my last boyfriend when I was >

“Telling a secret requires that we have a strong sense of self and an ability to make peace with our past and move on. We need to find a way to let our secrets out because they are our truths.”

MY LITTLE SECRET

first introduced to my husband,” she explains. “I didn’t want him to know I’d been pregnant just before I met him.”

As soon as the couple left the doctor’s office, Joan’s husband wanted an explanation. Turns out he was more upset that she hadn’t felt she could tell him the truth than that she’d terminated the pregnancies. Even so, 13 years later, Joan’s fourth abortion is still a secret. “What good would it do for him to know about that now?” she says.

Maybe she’s right. Maybe this is exactly the kind of information a woman should keep to herself, a story from her past that will benefit no one to share. “Some secrets—those that aren’t hurting anyone—are our right as individuals,” says Jeree Wade, a life coach in Montclair, New Jersey. But often, she continues, keeping secrets is an indication that we’re unwilling to deal with the repercussions of choices we made or circumstances we found ourselves in.

“Sometimes women keep secrets because they don’t feel good enough about themselves to accept their reality and share it with who it needs to be shared with,” says Wade. “Telling a secret requires that

you have a strong sense of yourself and an ability to make peace with your past and move on. Women need to find a way to let these secrets out, to release them, because they are our truths, our reality. They represent experiences that helped us grow.”

SINS OF OMISSION

B

ut there can be an awful lot at stake in coming clean. You might be ready to accept your own reality, but how is the person to whom you’re confessing your secret going to take the news? My friend Mona says she isn’t willing to find out.

For the past ten months, Mona, a 28-year-old real estate broker, has been engaged to a man she calls the love of her life, and she’s determined to have it all—the house, the husband, the bunch of kids. That’s why she’s never told her man that before they met, she’d been dating women. “If I told him, I think he’d leave me immediately,” she says. “He would feel like there is a side of me he would never be able to fulfill.” So Mona keeps her mouth shut about her past, even though she admits that rarely does a day go by that she doesn’t think about making love to a woman.

“It’s definitely hard, especially lately,” she says. “A lot of the times when we’re having sex I’m thinking of a woman. I feel guilty, but I love this man, and I want to get married and I want to have kids. When I picture that, I don’t see a woman. I picture myself, my fiancé and our children.”

Her best friend has told Mona, gently, that she’s not sure this marriage will work, because isn’t this exactly the kind of information a man is entitled to know before he walks down the aisle? I have to agree. How can she rationalize hiding such a huge part of who she is, especially when he’s bound to find out sooner or later?

Then again, who am I to judge? For years, I’ve justified not telling my child about her brothers by convincing myself I was protecting her. What if she thinks her father cares more about the boys than he does about her? My daughter is the product of a relationship best described as a train wreck. Except for my child, the whole episode was a series of mistakes I’d prefer to forget. Other women? Other children? In the cleaned-up version of my life story, they don’t exist. Instead of grappling with the choices I’ve made, I simply created a history for myself in which my judgment was always impeccable. This is the fiction I’ve shared with my daughter.

Mothers often edit their life stories when speaking to their daughters, observes therapist Lerner. “Mothers are very hesitant to share true experiences for fear their daughters will lose respect for them or repeat those behaviors themselves,” she explains. “But actually, daughters do best when they know the facts of family history, including very painful facts, because it helps them make clearer decisions about their own lives.” Conversely, Lerner cautions, our failure to speak candidly about our own experiences constitutes a tremendous loss of opportunity to bond with our children and sets a pattern for concealing the truth that our girls might one day follow themselves.

In other words, covering up my own bad choices wasn’t going to do my daughter any good. ▷

How to Let It Go

Keeping quiet about the most intimate details of your life can be healthy, even essential, says life coach Jeree Wade. But if you’re keeping a secret that might have an impact on someone else’s life, or influence the decisions they make, then it’s probably time to tell. Here are some tips:

DO SOME SOUL-SEARCHING. Get clear with yourself about why you’re keeping the secret in the first place. Do you think you made a mistake? Are you afraid people will reject you if they know the truth? Were you coerced into keeping a secret for someone else? The more anxiety you feel, the more difficult it’ll be for you to help another person make peace with the news. If you’re overwhelmed by the thought of coming clean, a therapist can help you work through your fear.

DON’T USE SHAME AS AN EXCUSE. “While you should be mindful of your feelings,” says Kumea Shorter-Gooden, Ph.D., coauthor of *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America* (Blackwomenshifting.com), “that doesn’t mean you need to spend 20 years trying to forgive yourself before you tell someone the truth. The very act of sharing the secret can be what leads to forgiveness.”

PRACTICE FIRST. The person who most needs to hear your secret is not necessarily the first person you should tell. Practice what you are going to say and how you are going to answer specific questions with someone who will support you in your effort to come clean: a good friend, a therapist, a minister. “The first step is literally to get the secret out of your mouth,” says Wade. “You need to find someone you trust.”

TAKE IT SLOW. Once they’ve made the decision to tell, “some women are tempted to rush in and tell all, every detail, without giving enough thought to the impact the news is going to have on the recipient,” says therapist and author Harriett Lerner, Ph.D. You need to be very careful not to use people, especially children, as a confessional. Let the other person lead the conversation by asking questions. And you should expect plenty of questions. Telling a secret is rarely over in one session.

BE SAFE. If you feel there is a possibility that the person you intend to speak to may become violent, have your conversation in a public space or with a therapist or mediator present.

—J.A.

MY LITTLE SECRET

WHAT THEY DON'T KNOW

M

arie, 28, is a stay-at-home mother who lives in a suburb of Minnesota with her two small children. Her husband earns six figures as a chief financial officer at a large corporation. Recently he was devastated when she finally came clean about the secret she'd been keeping for well over a year.

"After the birth of my daughter, I started to go really crazy with the credit cards," says Marie. "I was home with the kids and I would go through catalogs and buy stuff without even thinking about it." Before long she'd racked up \$12,000 in debt, and that was only the beginning. "My mother had me when she was 13, and we were really, really poor," she explains. "When I became an adult, shopping just made me feel better, like I didn't have to deny myself. But it went from a desire, to a need, to a compulsion I couldn't resist."

Marie would buy clothes, DVDs and things for the house and then hide them from her spouse. Desperate that her husband not see the merchandise and credit cards arriving at the house each day, Marie would rush home to intercept the mail. At one point, she even rented a private mailbox. The stress of keeping the secret was becoming unbearable. "It was devastating my family," she says. "I couldn't sleep; I had withdrawn from my husband and kids. I felt guilty all the time."

With her marriage in jeopardy, Marie and her husband went to a couples' retreat where she finally fessed up. "I wrote him a note and said I was very sorry and I knew this was going to hurt him, but that I was in trouble," she says. Marie was \$30,000 in debt.

Her husband broke down in tears, saying his wife's spending made him feel as if he couldn't provide for his family. Despite her man's pain and the struggle she now faces to erase her debt, Marie says coming clean was the best thing she could have done for the marriage. "When I told my husband the truth, it brought us closer together," she says. "It made me feel that I wasn't alone and he would be there for me. It was like the weight of the whole world was lifted from my shoulders."

NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH

T

herapist Shorter-Gooden says the realization that you no longer have to carry a burden alone is just one of the benefits of letting go of a secret. Another is what telling the truth can teach you about love. While secret-keepers fear that coming clean may irrevocably damage a relationship, often just the opposite is true. "Although the person you've kept the secret from may initially feel angry or betrayed, very often that person is eventually able to forgive and convey care, concern and enduring affection," says Shorter-Gooden. "Coming clean helps a woman realize that despite what she's done, she is still loved."

arie, 28, is a stay-at-home mother who lives in a suburb of Minnesota with her two small children. Her husband earns six figures as a chief financial officer at a large corporation. Recently he was devastated when she finally came

A week after my conversation with Marie, my daughter and I are in our small bathroom. I'm running her a bath and she's sitting on the toilet, swinging her feet back and forth. I decide this is the moment.

"Did you know," I say, turning from the tub and trying to appear casual, "that your father has some other children?"

Her eyes grow wide and her feet freeze in midair, "You mean I have brothers and sisters?"

"Well, I don't know if your father has any girls," I say, realizing that in my attempt to avoid the topic entirely, I had never investigated the possibility that there might be more children than the two I knew about. "But he definitely has two boys."

She asks their names, their ages, their birth dates, to which I offer what meager information I have. "Mama," she says, jumping up to peer directly into my face, "you don't know anything about this. I think you should Google it."

I put her in the bath and walk into the other room to rub my temples. While my daughter is years away from figuring out the mess I was in with her father, I know that one day she'll put it all together. Then my child, the only person in the whole world who actually thinks I'm perfect, will know the truth. For a while I sit on the edge of my bed with my

“Black women have been the poster children for deficient family structure and hypersexuality. We sense our human frailties will be seen through the lens of these stigmas.”

head in my hands then suddenly, I get it: This isn't about me; it's about the emotional well-being of my daughter. Having brothers is her new reality. My job right now is to help her process it, even if the facts don't make me look very good.

"Mama," my little girl says as I tuck her into bed that night, "it's so weird that I have brothers."

"Weird how?" I ask, all set to give the speech I had mentally prepared about how her father may have other children but it doesn't mean he loves her any less.

"It's just weird that I have brothers that I didn't even know about," she says staring at me, hard. "I mean, shouldn't I have already known about this? How come nobody told me?"

I want so badly to erase my sin of omission that I almost blurt out a lie: I didn't tell you because I just found out myself! But instead I take a deep breath and crawl into bed beside her. "Well, honey, I should have told you sooner," I whisper, "but sometimes your mother makes mistakes." □

ESSENCE senior writer Jeannine Amber lives in New York.

***Subjects' names and identifying details have been changed.**



What's the secret that haunts you? Sometimes the first step to releasing it is to get it out of your own head. If you're not quite ready to tell someone face-to-face, log on to ESSENCE.COM for a place to practice letting it go.