

SECRETS

Suzanne Somers



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KEEPING SECRETS

*To my family for their trust and courage
in allowing me to tell this story,
especially my dad.
It takes a big man to be so brave.*

The unexamined life is not worth living.
—**Plato**

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I don't give a shit that everybody knows I was a drunk,
I just care what they think about you.

—*My dad,*
November 1986

Prologue

I am an adult child of an alcoholic. My childhood and that of my brothers and sister was robbed by a terrible and painful disease no one ever wanted to talk about, including me.

I've always been able to make jokes of the lighter side of living with a drunk, but I never went any deeper than that. I never allowed myself to wonder what my real past meant or how it had affected me. I had buried it. I didn't want to know. But recently on vacation in Santa Fe, New Mexico, I was forced to understand.

I woke up in the middle of the night and started to write; and as I wrote, I cried. My memories had been buried for a reason. Alcoholism did have a devastating effect on me and my entire family. And I began to relive the pain I had been avoiding. Five hours later, when my husband awakened and asked what I was doing, I realized I was exploring a part of me I had never entered before. I had been in therapy, but I had never gone this deep. I began to sob as I read to Alan. I couldn't stop. I had begun a personal journey into my past, and I had to continue this task. It was difficult to recall the pain and trauma of my childhood. It was hard to confront the person I became after I moved out of my parents' house. I used to laugh at that part of me. It was embarrassing, but now I couldn't laugh anymore. Now I was beginning to understand.

Everyone thought I emerged from the family intact and okay. Out of six of us, four were alcoholics. I was the only child who didn't drink; and like millions of others, I did not understand why my life had been messed up for so long. I always blamed myself. I never connected growing up with an addict to my behavior as an adult. I had been sick for a long time.

My childhood was *not* normal. I grew up watching my dad behave so horribly, I hoped he'd pass out, while my mother prayed and covered up for him, hoping one day it would all just go away.

I watched my parents argue and abuse one another. Eventually, all of us children joined in the violence. I listened to my parents yell and

scream at each other long into the night. I never knew what would happen next. I didn't know what was real. The house was filled with violence, anger and fear; but we pretended to the outside world everything was okay.

I believed that once I left that environment, my troubles would disappear. Not so. The pain didn't go away; I just repressed it. Years and decades later I still carried the stigma. My childhood was my training ground for life. In order to get better, I needed to deal with the ordeal of my childhood. I had to relive it to get rid of it.

There are an estimated twenty-eight million children of alcoholics in the United States today. Research has shown that sons of alcoholic fathers have a four times greater risk of becoming alcoholics themselves. Daughters of alcoholic mothers have a three times greater risk than other women. Experts blame a genetic link coupled with growing up in an environment where children learn to drown their woes. But what about the children who don't drink? What happens to them?

Alcoholism affects the whole family. I never thought I was good enough to be happy. I knew that what was going on in our home wasn't normal. I longed to have a home life like my classmates. I didn't dare bring friends home because I was afraid I'd find my dad drunk or passed out on the floor.

Children of alcoholics never get to be children. The family's attention is focused on the parents' state of drunkenness, so the child's needs and feelings are ignored.

I hated what the disease did to my childhood and to my family. I never knew what to expect. We never confronted our reality. Once I left home, I retreated into a fantasy life. My new life was a lie. I was so ashamed of who I was, I tried to become someone I was not. My old life didn't exist. My fantasy became my reality. Being unrealistic threatened my mental health; it threatened my freedom. It was impossible to get close to any other human being. I became lonely. I lacked self-esteem. I lived in constant crisis. I was suicidal. But I didn't drink, so I thought I was "okay."

Thank God I was lucky enough to get help for myself and break the cycle of pain, humiliation and low self-worth. Alcoholism is a family disease, and it's contagious.

When you read this story, it's easy to dislike my dad. I always loved my dad with all my heart. I just never understood. None of us knew back then that this was a disease and could be treated.

No one knew anything about alcoholism, and it was not something you talked about. There were no self-help groups, no therapy. It was

not discussed in the press or the media. All those with the “secret” kept it a secret, and that is what we did.

My dad was a good man with dreams and talent, who wanted to be the best. He never planned to be an alcoholic. He never said, “When I grow up, I’m going to drink a lot and abuse my wife and children.” He wanted to be a good husband, a good father, a successful man. When he got the disease, he was unable to do or be any of these things. He tried to give us good times, but it always ended in disaster.

Mother was always in the middle, protecting us when Dad became violent and then protecting Dad from us when he went too far and we became violent ourselves.

My rage started at an early age. Too much missed sleep, too many violent nights, too much craziness.

My mother’s personality had changed. She is a sweet, nonviolent woman with a pink face and soft white curly hair. It is not natural for her to yell and scream; yet during those years, she yelled and screamed a lot. During those years Mother became nervous, introverted and insecure. When you live with an alcoholic, his main thing is to beat you down. As long as you don’t have confidence, you won’t leave. I think of the frustration my mother must have felt. She wanted to do something, but she didn’t know what to do. She was deeply religious, but her church didn’t provide any answers. Mother didn’t realize that as the wife of an alcoholic, she had become addicted to her husband’s disease.

It was all so sad to feel the disintegration of our family. It was like being on a sinking ship and not knowing how to swim.

Alcoholics can’t remember their past. In that sense the disease is merciful; but it leaves in its wake emotionally battered and bruised victims, usually the family. There is so much joy attached to the recovery of the addict that the victims are forced to push away all anger and resentment built up over the years as co-addicts. They say, “Let the past rest,” but it can sit and smolder down at the bottom of the soul.

The truth brings freedom from pain, freedom from anger and finally forgiveness. Once the victims can truly forgive, they can truly forget.

This is a story about a family that made it. It is my story, from my point of view, as I remember it. This is the imprint it left on my memory. The language is rough, but that is the way it was.

It was very difficult to write this book. I cried a lot. I had no idea, when I started on this project, of the pain and anguish I would endure as I journeyed into that secret part of my soul.

But upon completion, I found resolution. I was no longer angry with my father. I loved him. I felt sorry for him to have been burdened with

such a horrible disease for so long. I finally understood alcoholism as a disease, and I could forgive him.

I also felt relief at having a label—adult child of an alcoholic. I *had* been affected by the disease as had everyone in the family. The pieces of the puzzle were starting to fit. The relief was overwhelming.

At this point I could have put the book away. I had completed my personal task. But gnawing away at me were the millions of children who are hiding in their closets, afraid of the night and afraid of the day; the millions of children who suffer violence and emotional and physical abuse as part of their daily lives; the millions of children who feel ashamed and who don't learn what they are supposed to learn at school because they are exhausted physically and sapped emotionally; the millions of children who endure the humiliation and embarrassment of living with a drunk.

I thought of all the people, like myself, leading productive lives but not enjoying the relief that comes from understanding a troubled past. As difficult as I knew it would be, I wanted to share my story.

My family was outraged when I asked for their permission. They went through all the same emotions I experienced while writing it. They were angry, horrified, distraught and sad.

Everyone in my family is recovering from their disease. They are living happy, productive lives. On occasion they can make light of "the drinking years," but, like myself, it had never gone beyond that. The friends they have today don't know of the past (certainly not the ugly, dark side), and now I was asking them to share this story with the world. I wanted to let the secret out—the secret of my life and theirs. I didn't blame them for kicking and screaming.

It created a distance between my mother and myself at first. I felt anguished. My mother is my dearest friend.

After my sister read the book, she said, "I just thought you liked us better than that."

I can't put them through this, I thought. It's not worth the risk of hurting the people I love.

I realized they had a code of silence, a system of denial. They did not want to remember the past. It was buried, so let it rest. Denial gets passed on from generation to generation. It allows the disease to continue. I was asking a lot. Reading my book forced them to go back in their past, relive it and deal with it.

We talked a lot during this time. We argued and we cried. A new level of love, trust and communication passed through all of us and finally resolution and relief.

We all realized it was not important who we *were*, but who we *are* today; that we could celebrate the end of our long, painful journey.

One by one they gave me their blessing.

My brother Dan realized the benefit of the truth when after his daughter read the story, she wrote her own story for a class assignment about being a child of an alcoholic. She had been freed to express the pain and release it.

My brother Michael said that he was relieved to know after all this time it wasn't him.

My dad said, "I don't care that everyone knows I was a drunk, I just care what they think about you."

My sister Maureen said, "With your sense of excellence, I know you'll do this right."

My mother, after seeing Betty Ford on television, said, "If the President and his wife have the courage to tell their family secrets, then we can tell ours."

There are no words to describe my feelings of admiration for each member of my family. Their trust and courage in allowing me to tell this story is the greatest display of their love.

We are lucky. As a family we can look back and say, no it's not pretty. It's hard to tell and difficult to think about, but it happened. If the telling of this story can help others, then everything we went through has meaning and was worth it.

There is hope, and there is help at any age for anyone who has endured this kind of life. I made it out, and so can they. Those who have lived this way can learn to understand and finally to forgive. They can survive and be normal and happy. They no longer have to live their lives *Keeping Secrets*.

Part --- *ONE*

Be quiet, for Godsakes,” my mother pleaded.
“Oh, fuck you,” Dad yelled drunkenly. “Your ol’ man ain’t nothin’! Goddamn leech! Gobbles everything in two minutes. I could beat the shit outta him. The pig! Two kind words—ass and hole. Zero! Big nothin’!”

“Shut up,” my mother screamed.

“Tell your ol’ man he’s nothin’,” Dad slurred. “I could take him.”

“Sure, you could beat up an old man. Would that make you feel good?” she asked angrily.

I was nine years old. I lay in my bed listening to the same old drunk talk night after night. Well, some nights Dad would pass out and sleep through; but on other nights, usually when he was drinking lots of whiskey, he might sleep for four hours or so; and then he’d wake up belligerent—ready to fight anyone. Somehow, someone would become the victim of his rage. Often it was my grandfather, whom we called Father. I guess that ticked him off. Sometimes his rage would be aimed at me because I made it very clear I liked my mother better. Some nights, for no reason in particular, it would be Danny, my thirteen-year-old brother, or Maureen, my sixteen-year-old sister, who set him off. Maybe Danny didn’t mow the lawn just right or Maureen wore lipstick. You never knew. He’d just get full of “stinkin’ thinkin’” and one little thing would set him off all night.

“Can I get into bed with you?” my mother asked me. “He’s starting to shadow box in bed, and I don’t want a black eye.”

I loved my mother so much. It made me hate my father when he’d do this to her. It was four o’clock in the morning. Mom would have to go to work at 9 A.M. Maureen, Danny and I all had school at 8 A.M. None of us would have had any sleep. It had been one of the “terrible nights.” Dad came home from work drunk. Sometimes he would start drinking after he got home, but the nights he came home from work already drunk were the worst—like tonight. He had stumbled in the