

"False Confessions"

By Nancy Sandlin

I remember standing in my childhood kitchen with my back to the refrigerator. My older brother was pacing back and forth, and my sister was staring out the window. "You go tell her you did it," my brother demanded. He was four years older than me, and I must have been around five or six at the time. That would make him 10ish, and my sister 12ish. In children-years they were both waaay older than me - and certainly the rule makers of our sibling group.

"But I didn't do it," I spoke softly.

"Look, she won't be mad if she thinks it was you. You're their perfect little baby that never makes mistakes. Tell her you did it and we will all be able to leave this stupid kitchen," he continued his demands.

My sister glanced from the window to the fish bowl, which was hanging above the kitchen sink. The fishfood flakes were dissolving, and the water was becoming murky. The empty fishfood container sat on the countertop. Evidence. "Go tell her you did it and I will wash the fish bowl," my sister offered.

"But I didn't do it," I repeated in a shaky voice. The refrigerator rattled and hummed almost drowning out my claim of innocence.

"Mom said we can leave the kitchen once someone confesses to dumping all the stupid fishfood in the bowl. Tell her you did it or we will be here all day," my brother threatened. In my young mind I thought that sort of made sense. My sister had already started the process of cleaning the fishbowl.

I took a deep breath and reluctantly began the walk to the stairs that led to my parents' bedroom. The climb up the steps seemed twice as long as usual. When I arrived my mother was sitting in the chair by the window reading the newspaper. I don't remember the details of my false confession and I don't remember what she said afterwards. But I do remember the discomfort of telling my mother a mistruth in order to release my siblings from the kitchen quarantine. And I remember the feeling of being the bad guy, when I was not. I was innocent, but now I was guilty. Not of overfeeding the fish, but something far worse - misrepresenting myself and accepting false blame. Not standing up for myself. Not speaking my own truth.

A couple years later that same feeling resurfaced when I was in third grade. The new glittery pencil that I had just bought suddenly went missing from my school desk. I had only turned around a moment and it was gone. I looked around and saw my classmate drawing big stars on her paper with it. My initial thought was, "How could she have the exact same pencil?" Then reality caught up to

my innocent mind. I asked her politely if I could have it back. She said it was hers. I said it was mine. She called me a liar. The teacher approached us to see what the commotion was about. My classmate announced that I was trying to steal her pencil. The teacher looked at me, "Is that true?" As I tried to explain that it was mine my classmate interrupted, "Liar!" The teacher ended up settling it by putting it behind her back, "Pick a hand." My classmate became the new owner of the pencil. My heart sunk with the unfairness of it all. There I was again - "the bad guy" - labeled a thief and a liar - when I was innocent. Yet I was still unable to stand up for myself.

Later in life I found myself again in a similar situation. I discovered that someone very close to me had lied about being diagnosed with cancer. Before I had discovered the truth, she used me to tell her circle of friends the "bad news". I called all the people on her phone list because it was "too difficult" for her to call them herself. A few weeks later, I offered to drive her to her first treatment but she declined stating that someone else was driving her. When I stopped by to check on her, the friend that supposedly drove her to the appointment also stopped by. I realized quickly through conversation that her friends had been told I had driven her - when I had not. I put together all the other things that did not add up - and realized that she did not have the disease she

claimed. And - I was being used to support, and to spread, the lies.

This became a transformative moment for me. I could have gone along with the script that someone else was writing for me, compromising myself, my character, to protect another.

But years of personal reflection helped me to learn that I am the author of my own story and no one can script me as a liar, or a thief, or a co-conspirer. They cannot misrepresent me or make me accept false blame, in a false role. I own my own story and I am the only one who can define my character.

So at that transformative moment, I embraced my true self - my authentic self - and I leaned in to the conversation to discuss what was really going on. It ended up being an intervention of sorts. We had an honest, loving, open conversation, and by me holding to my own truth - by not accepting a false role that someone else cast me into - real healing began.

I say to the little girl worried about the fish and the pencil - and to anyone who has found themselves caught in someone else's script - you are your very strongest in your own story, and only you can write that book.

