



STORIES
OF
VICTORY

The Closet

A Daughter's Story of Shame & Redemption

The magazines were under their bed. They were also in the bathroom underneath the sink. From a very young age my older sister and I were in charge of cleaning the house, including my parent's bedroom, so I quickly became accustomed to handling these magazines. I usually found one, two, or three stacked together. Week after week while cleaning, I didn't think too much about it as I picked them up. I mindlessly cleaned and placed them back where I found them. I was about six years old when I first opened one up.

That day, my parents were not home and my older sister was otherwise preoccupied. I was bored. The place was small and modest, and I was desperately looking for a way to pass the time, which seemed to go by painfully slow. I decided my parent's room may be an interesting place. So, I made my way there.

I began what I hoped would be an adventure by going into their closet. My eyes scanned through my mother's shoes, which consisted of a pair of well-worn, medium-nude heels, and another well-worn pair of black wedges. I tried on both pairs. I loved my mother so much and I treasured her things. My dad owned several pairs of cowboy boots as well as white Nike tennis shoes, but I didn't dare touch any of his things. I looked up at the clothes hanging on the racks and saw my mother's dresses and my dad's shirts and pants. My mother's slim collection consisted of a few brown and black dresses. My dad had several new shirts in his area of the closet. I looked up at the very top shelf of their closet. Mystery and discovery beckoned me, but I couldn't reach the top shelf, so I quickly made my way to the dining room and dragged with me the answer to my problem: a chair.

I climbed on the chair and finally had full view of their top shelf. There, I found a stack of magazines. As I gazed upon them, something of my mother's words came to my mind. My mom had said something about hating my dad's "dirty magazines" and other things my young mind did not comprehend. I wondered what was disgusting about them and why did he have them.

On previous days, I'd just mindlessly pick them up as I cleaned their room, but today the covers seemed to call out to me into discovery of something mysterious. Curiosity drew me in, but as soon as my fingers started flipping through the pages, my eyes captured images too shameful to describe. A different kind of darkness I hadn't known met me there. This darkness began to spin a web of shame in and around me. I was caught. My eyes burned as I turned from one image to the next. Confusion set in as I looked at these women and men. Was this the "dirty" my mom had been talking about? But these were women and I was a young woman child, so did this mean I was like them? Was I also "dirty"? Fear began pulsing in my heart. I didn't know why, but I didn't want anyone to see me looking at this. What was this feeling? I didn't have a name for it at that tender age, but it was shame. Embarrassment. Humiliation. Desolation. It was the feeling of wanting to disappear. Confusion. Guilt. I was now seeing what my dad viewed and what my mom watched with him even though she seemed to hate it. My heart was immediately split into her disgust of him and his guilt. I felt exposed. How could I ever face him again? This is what he thought of women. The way he treated my mom and I, now, made sense. I touched my face with both hands; it was hot. My palms were sweaty and shaky. I felt a lump in my throat and pain in my stomach. I put the magazines back on the top shelf, climbed down from the chair, and pushed it back out into the dining room, trembling. Silent. Confused. Frightened. I felt myself slowly and helplessly falling into a vortex of confusion, darkness, and deep shame.

Decades later I am still discovering the pervasive impact this experience has had on me. The dehumanization of men and women, the abuse, the dishonor, the violence and humiliation that burned in my brain through those images and through my awareness of my parent's engagements with one another, profoundly hijacked the way I viewed relationships, sex, femininity, masculinity and my identity for most of my life. For many years, I viewed sexuality as dangerous, femininity as unsafe, and masculinity as something to be avoided and feared.

I have suffered through fear of true intimacy for most of my life. I remember being a young girl and seeing pictures of what my friends considered "romantic"; however, all I felt was a gaping distance from the desire to experience that "romance". As a teenager, I hid this truth from my social circle, but did not realize this was not God's plan for me. In fact, I thought it actually helped to keep me away from danger and the relationship troubles that most of my friends in middle school and high school were experiencing.

However, this fear of intimacy became most apparent to me within courtship. So much so, I began to believe I would not be able to marry, and I broke up with my, at that time, fiancé. As I think about my marriage journey with a godly man who loves God and loves me deeply, I realize it is miraculous. At the same time, I don't want to ignore the many years I've dealt with this painful sense of terror, shame, and danger—or how I've tried to deal with it all through suppression and denial. For many years, I attempted to convince myself of supernatural healing. I tried to use religion to guilt myself into whatever image of the “perfect wife” was currently floating through the Church and the expectations of women. I have so longed to be “normal” that for many years I navigated life and marriage in a dissociated state, which really is a dismemberment of soul. I thought I had to cut off pieces of my soul because these pieces kept reminding me of deep shame, lies about who I am, and darkness as it relates to sexuality and relationships. The cutting off of pieces of my heart has been unconscious as a result of not knowing how to untangle all the painful mess created in my childhood by my dad's pornography and masochistic use of women. Soul dismemberment seemed like the only option to my wounded heart. How else could I become a wife and mother? How could I move forward and walk in the newness that the Bible says exists for me and that I have so longed for? But, if I cut off the pieces that hurt, then I could move on in what “normal” Christians and people do. Except, I have not been the whole me. I have left behind pieces of my heart that I need; pieces that belong to God, and I am coming to realize that.

The lies and darkness deposited into that little girl through those pornographic magazines have been a cruel web that I continue to untangle from. Countless times in my life, it has brought despair, terror, confusion, and loss of hope.

This story is one the hardest stories to face and write due to the deep shame which embedded itself in the tender soul of that little girl; that shame which I have carried all of my life. Now, I am realizing God is claiming that very moment of heartbreak and asking me to allow the memory to surface, write it out, and invite His Holy Spirit to enter this story. As I allow Christ to take me by the hand, shame will begin to lose its grip on me, and I will be able to experience God's goodness in the land of the living.