

**Shared Secret**  
**Short Story**  
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## Shared Secret

During his early formative years, Nico and his father were nearly joined at the hip—watching football games on television, taking rides in the country and simply sitting on the porch while they solved the world’s problems. Of course, this changed as Nico grew up and developed his own ideas, occasionally questioning Dominic—to the older man’s obvious annoyance.

When Dom decided to stop receiving kidney dialysis, for instance, one of their last phone conversations nearly cast an enduring shadow over how Nico would remember the relationship.

“Dad, you know what this means, don’t you?” Nico asked.

“Of course, I know what it means, goddamn it! I’m just tired of all the bullshit, and this is the only way I can make it stop.”

“Okay, okay. You don’t need to get pissed off. I had to ask you for my own sake, so I can be at peace with this. It’s your right to decide, and I’ll support whatever you want to do.”

“I know you will. I’m sorry. I don’t want things to end like this. Come and see me, so we can talk a bit more face-to-face.”

So, the next morning, Nico boarded a plane for his old hometown. By early afternoon, he was sitting with his father in the hospice center where Dom would spend his final days.

Dom slept much of the time, but sometimes the sedation would wear off and father and son would reminisce. Much of the talk involved small, amusing memories, so Nico was surprised at the turn that occurred the day before Dom passed away.

“You know, Dad, you said some pretty wild things over the years, and you often had your own way of looking at the world. I remember when you hit your hand with a hammer and spewed the most impressive string of profanity I ever heard, “Goddamn, fucking son-of-a-bitch, great Jesus Christ, blue balls on crutches!”

“Ha! Don’t remember that, but it sounds like me.”

“Oh, it was you alright. I’d heard most of those terms before, but blue balls on crutches was new and I asked for elaboration. You just looked at me and said, ‘Well, *it hurt,*’ as if that explained everything.”

“It did for me, I guess. My hand probably hurt like a bastard, so I could not be held responsible for what I said in the moment.”

“Fair enough, but there were a number of times you said things that made sense only to you. Remember how you would say you could kill a man more easily than a dog? I know you love dogs, but you never really answered my question about why you had to kill anyone to make that point.”

“Interesting that you should bring that up. Turns out it was true, although I never killed a dog.”

“What? Are you trying to tell me something? You’re not saying you killed a man, are you?”

“Well, there’s no harm in telling you now, because they can’t get me where I’m going. But just listen, so I don’t run out of energy or time before I finish.”

Nico nodded, and Dom began, speaking just above a whisper.

“Remember old Harlan, your grandmother’s second husband?”

“Yeah, he drowned when his car ran into the river. It must be more than 30 years ago now.”

“That’s what it was supposed to look like. And I guess it did look like that to everyone.”

And that’s how the story Nico had never heard began. Dom remained remarkably coherent as he told it, even declining a nurse’s offer of a sedative so he could finish relating an experience he had never shared with anyone.

He recounted how he overheard a conversation between Nico’s mother and his older sister Katrina. His sister, only 12 or 13 years old at the time, sobbed deeply as she told her mother that Harlan had taken her into his office and molested her.

Katrina was Dom’s first child, and the one most like him. She would always hold a special place in his heart. He was horrified by what Harlan did to his daughter and shocked when his wife told the girl they would not tell anyone else what had occurred.

“Mom, I don’t understand,” Katrina choked out, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Harlan made me do awful, disgusting things! He’s a horrible man! Don’t you want to stop him?”

“Yes, I want to stop him,” came the cold response. “I’ll talk to him, and that’s going to be the end of this. You have to just go on like it didn’t happen.”

Dom told Nico his wife had never divulged suffering abuse of any type as a child. But when he heard her order Katrina to keep her horror secret, he knew she must have been molested and traumatized when she was young.

“It was the only reason I could find for why she would want to hide what happened to your sister,” he said. “It reminded her of a pain she needed to forget. I know she was trying to do the right thing, but she did to Katrina the same thing someone did to her.”

Dom knew he and his wife would soon be having a difficult conversation—one she had avoided for years—but his first priority had to be protecting his child. He had to punish the man who had unforgivably and irrevocably scarred his daughter and ensure Harlan would never again harm Katrina—or anyone else.

The next week, when his wife and her mother went to an afternoon coffee klatch, he told Harlan about a small house for sale off the old river road. Harlan bit, because he was always on the lookout for rental properties to add to his slumlord portfolio.

Many town residents regarded Harlan as a successful businessman who had helped build the community. After arriving from Chicago, he established a successful taxi company and a tavern that allowed him to accumulate the funds to buy real estate.

Inexplicably, he always drove beat-up old cars when he could have afforded much newer and more elegant vehicles. He often employed questionable characters to perform odd jobs and small jobs, sometimes allowing them to live on his properties.

Despite her occasional exasperation with her husband, Katrina’s grandmother loved him. Had she known what Harlan did to her granddaughter, however, she would have divorced him in half a heartbeat and quite likely have turned him into the law. She’d had a hard life before she met Harlan, and she didn’t need him making it even more difficult.

Continuing his story, Nico's father recalled how Harlan picked him up and followed directions about a mile outside town. Dom directed Harlan down a rutted gravel road that he said led to a dock affording a good view of the home.

"You could tell from the tree branches hanging over the road that people didn't go there very often, so I didn't think we'd have company in the middle of the week," Dom told his son. "Harlan was always out searching for shacks he could buy cheaply, so even if someone saw us it would just look like he was on one of his hunts."

Harlan stopped the car and started to ask where the house was, but he gasped and flinched as Dom's gun barrel pressed into his ribs. It was the first he suspected that he was in trouble, and in a shaky voice Harlan whined, begged for his life and pleaded for mercy.

"That pathetic, evil bastard admitted everything and even offered me \$10,000 to let him go and keep quiet," Dom said. "That just pissed me off even more, so I walked him to the edge of the river, made him kneel and put his head underwater. He thought I was going to shoot him, but that would have been too good for him."

Dom put his foot on the back of Harlan's neck and pushed his face into the muddy riverbank. After Harlan struggled and flailed for about 30 seconds, Dom pulled him up by his shirt collar and let him catch his breath. Then he shoved him beneath the surface again, pulling him out and resubmerging him half a dozen more times.

"I wanted him to suffer," Dom said. "Finally, I turned him around and looked into his eyes as I pulled him into the river and held him under for the last time. He knew it was over, and I wanted to see the fear on his face as the lights went out."

Then it was simply a matter of pushing Harlan's body into the current and letting it drift away. It would surface and be found the next day by kids fishing about 10 miles downstream, where a shirt sleeve had snagged on a fallen tree.

Meanwhile, Dom changed into the dry clothes he had left in a bag on the floor of the car. He rolled down the windows, left the driver's door open, shifted the car into neutral and gave it a good push from behind. The vehicle rolled down the slight incline, crunching its way across the gravel, smashed through the rickety old pier into the river, and floated briefly as it filled with water and then sank to the bottom.

Dom followed a path along the river back to town, well away from the bank where Harlan took his last breath. Traffic was light and nobody saw him, so near the city limits he emerged from the roadside woods and simply walked home from there.

"After those kids found that goddamn son-of-a-bitch, the police dragged the river and found the car," Dom recalled. "Since the windows and the driver door were open, they figured Harlan either got out and then drowned or floated out afterwards. They looked at the evidence in front of them and assumed he accidentally shifted the car into neutral, and it rolled into the river before he could stop it."

Nico sat quietly for a moment, staring at his father in amazement. A part of him couldn't believe what he'd heard.

"Holy shit, Dad. Are you telling me you tortured Harlan and then murdered him? I saw you intimidate the hell out of people and even put a hurt on a few, but I never would have guessed you could do something like that."

“I hadn’t thought of it as torture, but in this case I like the sound of it. As for murder, I’ve always thought of it as justifiable homicide.”

“Weren’t you worried that you’d be caught?”

“Sure, a little, but I kept it simple to reduce the chances I would slip up. As long as it looked like an accident had occurred when Harlan was doing something typical, I thought the police might not investigate any further. And there were no footprints or tire tracks on the gravel, so I was willing to take my chances and pay whatever price that involved.”

“This is amazing. Just fucking amazing. Does Katrina know you did it?”

“No, you’re the first one I’ve ever told about it. I had to be content with her knowing that Harlan could never hurt her again—she didn’t need the burden of knowing the details, just that he was dead.”

“Are you going to tell her before you go?”

“Nah, and I don’t think you should tell her, either. She got through what happened and built a good life for herself. Why mess with that?”

“Wow, you are Katrina’s avenging angel. It may take a while to absorb this, but I’m pretty impressed—maybe even a bit in awe of you. I’m proud of you, too, but why tell me now—when you kept it to yourself for so long?”

“With my time almost up, very soon you’ll be the only one left who knows this. Consider yourself the trusted keeper of a sacred family secret. I’m hoping you see it as my parting gift to you, and knowing I made you proud is a gift for me.”

A nurse quietly entered Dom’s room a moment later, and this time he accepted the sedative. He was drained, and he drifted off for what would be the last time. He dreamed



of Harlan's murder, seeing himself as a purveyor of justice, and he died early the next morning with a smile on his face.

Fifteen years would pass before Katrina told Nico what happened to her and asked him what he thought their father would have done if he had known.

"Do you think he would have killed Harlan?" she wondered out loud. Nico paused for a few seconds before he answered, as he thought about the secret Dom had entrusted to him—and his desire to protect Katrina even after he was gone.

"Interesting question," Nico began slowly. "There's no way to say for sure. But Dad didn't let people get away with much, and I saw him step in a number of times when he saw someone picking on a weaker person. My money says if he knew, he'd have done the right thing."

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