

Trade Secrets

CHRIS FRANK

On a clear day, I can see maybe 10,000 windows from my own. My view is to the East, so at dusk I see 10,000 reflections of the sunset. The rest of the day is less spectacular, offering apartments and more apartments, but I marvel sometimes at how many people I must be seeing.

A few mornings ago, two storm clouds converged right outside, one from the north and the other from the south, concealing my view. It's winter here, too cold for rain, so I watched as so-many snowflakes darted about, trying for the ground but failing for the strength of the crosswind. If the clouds had been a fire, they'd have burned brightly and lasted not long. So I set aside my email and stood to see them vanish, and as they did, they left us a clear morning in New York. I saw fifteen people in windows, on balconies, caught by the moment like myself.

In the room are three wine glasses, full of water, and three people to drink from them. My two roommates sit at our small dinner table, Anderson reading a book, Robert reading the Internet, or using it, or watching it, or whatever. Together, they intercept what little January air survives our suicide-resistant window and our regulated radiators. Across the small room, alone on the love-seat, I am uncomfortably warm. I am uncomfortably seated, too, uncomfortably reading *Moby Dick*. I turn the page forward, then back again after I realize I've lost track of why Melville is classifying whales by folio.

Anderson gets up, and I am hopeful. There he goes, headed for the . . . kitchen. And past! Into his bedroom! I expect his door to shut, wait for his door to shut, wonder why his door hasn't shut. Why hasn't it shut?

He returns, wearing slippers.

In the room are three wine glasses, full of water, and three people to drink from them.

"I'm going for coffee," I say. It is probably after midnight. I am not going for coffee. I put on my shoes and my coat, knowing I'll need neither. I shut the door quietly behind me.

No one knows I'm in the hallway but my roommates. Each step I take is silent. I am a shadow, creeping along with the motion of the moon. I would look ridiculous if I were not invisible.

I am Bruce Wayne. Down two flights, I carry a secret. At the landing on the 14th floor, I stop, listen. Is anyone coming? I've been here before, and I may be here many times more, but I still haven't got a good method for choosing the right moment to open this door. So I just guess, like last time, guess and get lucky.

I am close now. One door left to walk through, one door to my immediate left. I knock, so softly I'm not sure I hear it, but I don't want to start with more noise than I need. How long should I wait?

Claire answers the door. She answers in nothing but a towel, which she lets fall to the floor as she turns and slips back into the darkness of her catwalk of a hallway. I turn the lock. Someone will knock again in the morning, much more loudly than I did. And she will turn to me in the sunlight, one finger covering her smile, and her skin on the sheets will sound scarcely louder than her whisper:

"No one's here."

Claire and I have an open relationship. We can say nearly anything to each other; we sometimes sleep with other people. For a long time, though, we were a secret—I was fraternizing with an authority, and we were the only two who could know. We had an arcane university policy to thank for this, and as illicit as that might sound, it's not actually an interesting story. More interesting is how being a secret guided our coming to know one another.

Where trust is usually something earned, for us it was prerequisite. Without it, our fear of being discovered, which was great, would have been too much to manage. So we trusted. Where my other romances have started with first steps, Claire and I took a first leap.

We met in an elevator. We leapt upwards, not into a void or across some chasm, and our trust, rooted in just one secret, extended far above its roots. It was a Sequoia tree for us to climb. There we sat, there at the top, covered by branches and learning each other. I have never met someone so quickly. So much fear spent on other people, on keeping us from them, meant I had none left to fear knowing her, none left to fear her knowing me. Being a secret broke us open, like the first crack in a levee before the floodwater rushes through.

The image of a flood, apt in size and speed, also carries a sense of disaster. Indeed, Claire tells me the bond we owe our secret is like one formed

between people who endure a car crash, a flood, or any life-threatening event, when we find ourselves suddenly vulnerable together. I think of Isidor and Ida Straus, who drowned aboard the *Titanic* because Ida refused to leave her husband behind when the crew cried “Women and children first!” She chose to share danger with her husband over safety alone (“Ida Straus”).

Bonds like these are the accidental good results of bad happenings, and Claire isn’t suggesting that our secret was a disaster. It wasn’t. It brought us closer, like a disaster could have, but without all the horror. Still, it wasn’t all good—there was damage in the distance our secret put between us and our peers. No one could know we were together, and given how often we saw each other, that meant no one else could know us well. No one, not even Claire, could fully offset the loneliness of knowing only one person well.

How I wanted to shout her name from the rooftops! Or at least to throw a party and invite her. Though our secret was half-mine and it might have been disastrous for anyone to learn it, I wanted to share it with everyone, as if it were the sweetest, raciest bit of someone else’s gossip. “Someone else” might have been me in 1999, in middle school, when we sent secrets back and forth like snowflakes in a crosswind and loved it. At twelve, that was acceptable, but at twenty, I felt immature, disappointed in how difficult it was for me to keep quiet. To know better than to tell was not enough for me. I should have *felt* better than to tell; not-telling should have been easy.

Sometime in 1999, I am in sixth grade and on the phone with my friend Hope. We’re talking about our friend K., who has a crush on someone, and Hope knows who. I don’t, but I must, because I have a crush on—guess who—K.

“You can tell me,” I say. “I promise: I won’t tell anyone else, and I won’t tell her you told. I won’t even tell her I know.”

Hope is unimpressed. “Chris,” she says, “you have no idea what trust even means.” She is two years older than I am, and says things like this often. It’s one of my favorite parts of our relationship.

“I do so,” I insist. In fact, I suspect I don’t, but I can’t explain the reasoning to myself, and now I want to know what trust means almost as badly as I want to know who K. has a crush on. Hope has two secrets, not one. I press on. “If you tell me,” I say, “I’ll tell no one else, ever. That’s what trust means.”

“No.” She is, as usual, firm but not impatient. “That’s what it means to trust you. This isn’t about you.”

Everything is about me.

“I have this secret,” she continues, “because K. trusted me. And you know what that means?”

I do. “That you tell no one else.”

“Exactly.”

I’m still not seeing her point, so I stay quiet. She is expecting this.

“You,” she reminds me gently, “are someone else.”

Of course, she was right. I am someone else. What’s important in this story is not that I learned what secret-keeping requires; it is that Hope never flinched, never seemed even a little bit tempted to tell, and not for a moment did I feel close to convincing her. At fourteen, she seemed to have overcome what I struggle with still: secrets say both “Keep me!” and “Share me!” convincingly, and I don’t know how to listen.

A few days ago I happened upon a crosswalk sign with both its hand and walking man lit up, saying *stop* and *go* at once. I didn’t know what to do, so I played safe and waited. The man switched off after maybe a minute, leaving me the hand and a clear command: don’t walk. Only then, with a clear signal from the sign, could I look both ways, notice there were no cars coming, and cross the street in defiance.

Actually that’s not quite true. I *could* have crossed before, but I was sharing a moment with the sign, making up disaster stories, grinning and wondering how the universe might end should I disobey this command that was not actually possible to obey. I imagined the whole thing imploding, unable to cope with the contradiction, like the systems of formal logic I study at school. This being fantasy, the stakes were low, and the absurdity seemed unimportant.

Secrets are important and their stakes are high, so the image of the sign is perhaps inadequate. Hope would have read it simply: if the hand is lit, don’t walk. Ignore the man. If you’ve agreed to keep a secret, then keep it. The desire to share it is something we must overcome. And while sometimes that’s exactly right, it’s now nine years since 1999, and time to ask an old question again: Hope, if you’re reading this, who did K. have a crush on?

It is exceedingly likely that she would tell me. So long, formal logic—I am still someone else, and I would bet heavily that in the last nine years K. has said nothing like, “Hope, it’s okay to tell Chris now.” The same rules apply. It’s just that Hope has not stated them completely. For her, secrets were simple. And though they are not, she has good company in reading them that way—the *OED* says they are just things “kept from knowledge or observation; hidden, concealed.” Fine. That’s not wrong, but it’s incomplete, lacking a sense of time. Secrets are kept, yes, but *for how long?*

Once I wrote down two of my deepest secrets on a page in my journal, tore them from the book, carried them to the fireplace, and watched them

burn. Those secrets I will keep forever. While my secret with Claire was also deep, it did not last long compared to forever—we kept it first from everyone, then just from everyone at school, and eventually, when our circumstances at school changed, we ceased to be a secret at all. I have not yet shouted her name from a rooftop, but I could, and provided enough wine and a good night for it, I might.

Our secret was unique in many ways, but there is at least one way in which it was typical: it spread. Though we don't often consider it, most secrets are not meant to be kept from everyone, and not meant to be kept forever. A couple kept a pregnancy secret until after they married; a stage manager told his lead actress that a *New York Times* reporter had been in the audience only after the play ended; I bought a present last week, but you won't find out what it is until Christmas. Circumstances change, and secrets mature. Most secrets are like wine, which does not start out ready for drinking; first the bottle or the would-be drinker must age until . . . what? The wine is ready according to standards of taste, and the would-be drinker is ready according to law. What makes secrets ready to reveal?

I don't actually know how Claire chose others to share our secret with. I followed a general principle: I assumed anyone I told would tell a few others, so I'd consider who these might be, and decide—if these peripheral people's knowing would probably cause harm, I would say nothing; if their knowing would probably be harmless, I would tell. This was not a precise science, because harm is uncertain—Claire might be upset with me for telling a particular person, I might underestimate who that person would tell, that person might underestimate his friends—but I tried to be conservative, and it worked. The same general principle allowed more people to know in time, because as we approached the end of the academic year, the consequences of the wrong people knowing grew less severe. If in the beginning we were running naked through the rain, by the end we'd found an umbrella for armor that grew larger the longer we were out. We could say hello to select people on the street, invite them underneath, and we would all still keep pretty dry. That's how our secret began as absolutely private, then spread to people far, far away from school, then eventually to peers who were separate from our particular corner, and finally, when the rain stopped, to anyone.

Let me return to an unmarried couple concealing a pregnancy. *We will be frowned on for this*, they think, *but when we are married, it will be okay*. So they keep the secret until marriage. A stage manager thinks of an actress, *If she knows the reporter is here, she'll be nervous throughout the show, but after the show, she'll want to know*. And with a gift, we think, *If I tell you now, it will ruin the*

surprise. We secret-keepers are all making the same call: *The stakes are low enough now that I can share*. But still, someone might confront the couple with the math, the actress might have felt entitled to know before she went on, and you might not like the gift. The stakes may be lower, but they are still there, and we are vulnerable whenever we share. Perhaps we should wonder why we bother.

Just as I drank wine long before I learned to love it, because I liked it for its forbiddenness, I thought sharing secrets was attractive for just the same reason. This cannot be—if secrets were attractive just for their forbiddenness, then as soon as it became okay to share them, we would no longer want to! When I could, though, I was delighted to tell people about Claire. (Indeed, I must still be, or I would not have given her so many words in this essay.) I don't often share secrets when I shouldn't, though of course I err sometimes. Forbidden or not, sharing secrets feels good.

As I write this, I am sitting in a restaurant on Ninth Street and Alice's boyfriend Allen is here with someone I've never met, on what I think is a date. From the back of her head and the way he's been speaking to her, I was sure she was Alice until she turned her head.

Should I say something? Hello to him? A word of warning to Alice? I can't even be sure what I've walked in on, so what would I warn her about? Maybe he's not on a date at all, or maybe Alice and Allen are sometimes open like Claire and I are. But I should, I think, say hello. If he's comfortable in his actions, he'll think nothing of it, and if he's self-conscious, I will haunt him. He'll always wonder whether he should say something to Alice in case I have already, whether she's waiting, testing him; and for wronging my friend, he'll deserve it.

I find, though, that I do not wish this on him. He has given me a secret I could use against him, has exposed his flesh and handed me a knife, but I cannot wield it. It does not matter that he's exposed himself accidentally; the knife seems to me a gift, and I feel compelled to give him something in return. But what? For the first time since we met months ago, I can see something uniquely his, something once concealed that he's revealed to me, and I want to tell him, "You're okay, and thank you!" But I can't. He doesn't know he is vulnerable, doesn't know he's revealed anything at all, so I can't reveal myself in turn without seeming a surprise attacker. I wish I could. I'd like to see him, and to be seen.

I wish this even though he might be wronging Alice, because he reminds me of Claire, whom I came to know while she was vulnerable. I don't just mean she was vulnerable to others because of our circumstances; ultimately,

she was vulnerable to me. Where we began hidden from everyone else, we were also hidden from one another, and somehow we ended up naked, visible, seeing each other. We got naked, of course, by removing our clothes, but we revealed ourselves by sharing secrets. *Here is this part of me you do not know*, we said. *I hope you like it*. I did not just come to know Claire while she was vulnerable; I came to know her because she was vulnerable.

And I once thought we were unique in this. Of course, we were not. Should I ever come to know Allen, it will not happen by stumbling upon his secrets; instead, he will give them to me on purpose, and I will give him mine. That is, after all, what they are for, and Claire and I are just an easy-to-read story of how to build a friendship, of sharing secrets back and forth and back and forth until finally, two people see each other, clear as morning.

WORKS CITED

- “Ida Straus.” *Wikipedia*. 12 Apr. 2008. 11 June 2008 <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ida_Straus&oldid=205117871>.
- “Secret.” Def. 1. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989.

214 - MERCER STREET