

TRACEY BENTLEY

At the age of 2 my mother and father divorced and my mother married my stepfather shortly after. My mom, brother, sister and I all moved with him as a family. At the age of 3 or before I became a victim of sexual abuse by my stepfather. My brother left to go live with my father a short time later. I now know he was an interruption to my stepfather's agenda. It wasn't until around Junior High age did I realize that this wasn't a normal life. I just thought it was a game that was to remain a secret. I saw that he was also spending time with my sister, Tonya, two yrs older and wondered if they too, were playing that game but I would never ask. This happened every time Mama would have a church meeting or a bridge night with friends. When Tonya started having boyfriends my stepfather would become very angry if she talked about him very much or if the boy friend would call. In other words, he was very jealous. He once beat her with a leather strap because she wouldn't take a ring off that her boyfriend had given her. It wasn't like that so much with me. I was more the fill in when my sister wasn't around.

My mama was and is a very social, fun, and loving woman, a pillar in our little community. I believe God gave her the gift of laughter. She found humor in the most difficult times and always took the opportunity to tell a funny story. Today, I see this was our survival. Hugh (my stepfather) controlled everything she did. We all walked on eggshells at home in fear of him.

We always went to church. It was a Central Christian Church and I have no idea, even today what they believe but went because it was the right thing to do. It also portrayed a good image. My mom became a Christian when I was a sophomore in high school and drove us all crazy with her "Praise the Lords" but in time settled in to a very sweet relationship with her God. I saw a peace in her that I longed for. No one ever knew or suspected that things were completely dis-functional except that my stepfather was somewhat of a hermit. Once we got to into high school the abuse wasn't so constant, at least for me. My sister and I both were very blessed with many friends, social clubs and popularity. This helped to hide what our lives were at home. My mama knew that my stepfather was too strict and didn't really care for children but the secret of abuse was never revealed.

My Daddy remarried a precious woman who had three children. The youngest being the only girl named Dena and close to my sister's age. She became our third sister instantly. We shared the darkest secrets, all except one. It was wonderful to go to Daddy's every other weekend and long summer visits. There were always lots of people coming and going. Those were fun times. There was always a feeling of freedom. God spared my brother by giving him this environment to grow up in. I'm so grateful for that.

I began to date a boy when I was a freshman in high school. His family was the All American, happy, church going family. His parents were loved and appreciated in our small town. I began to go to the First Baptist church with them and I was able to get a picture of what I wanted my family to be when I married. We dated for five years. During that time I felt a strong calling to love God and to serve Him, whatever that meant. All I wanted in life was to get married and be a mom. I just knew I could get it right because I knew so well what wasn't right. It was a warped view of marriage but it was my view. When my boyfriend wanted to do the sensible thing and get an education to support a family before marriage, I took it personal, like I did everything and broke off the relationship.

Being the needy person that I was I set out to find someone that would love and marry me. A few months later a coworker introduced me to her brother, 12 years my senior but the most handsome, most attentive, kindest man I had ever met. He lived in El Paso and was a new Christian of one year. That was in May. We had a couple of dates that weekend, many phone calls and letters through the summer. I didn't see him again until Labor Day weekend in September. Before the weekend was over he had asked me to marry him. Feeling so loved and so excited, our journey began. I did, however, feel very compelled to tell him about the abuse and did so the weekend before our wedding. I swore him to secrecy. He would never tell anyone, especially my family. He assured me that he loved me and we would be fine.

We married in February. Blissfully in love, involved in the Baptist church, and once again living what would appear the perfect life. I became pregnant two months later, his business began to go under and life started to be real. My warped view of marriage began to crumble. I thought if someone would just love me, meet my needs, I would be happy for the rest of my life. I learned that I didn't know what I needed or what would make me happy. No matter what my husband did, how many times he told me he loved me, no matter how many compliments he gave me, how much affection, it was never enough. I was angry all the time and I didn't know why. There was such a hole that couldn't be filled. I literally felt I was becoming schizophrenic because I couldn't be

anything but mad in my home but when I stepped out my front door I was the epitome of happy, fun and put together.

Ten years into our marriage I hated who I was and there was no way out. Finally, a simple phone call began to unravel me. I called my mom just to check in and she wasn't her normal jolly self. She informed me that my grandmother had been very sick, (no news to me because she had already been abusing her prescription drugs making her a little crazy) and that Hugh had been going to her home every Tuesday to help take care of her. Mother said "if you never loved him before, love him now because he has gone above and beyond to help me." When they went to see her that day, the police were there and a restraining order had been put on Hugh. My grandmother said he had tried to rape her. It was as if a knife had pierced my heart. It hit me that others were being hurt by his sick behavior. I called my sister, still never having discussed the abuse with her and told her this news. She told me not to tell one soul and she would get to the bottom of it. Her answer was that my grandmother was crazy. I didn't buy it. My stepfather never did anything that didn't benefit him.

Shortly after that, Dena came to visit me and in conversation mentioned the incident with my grandmother. I couldn't believe she knew. No one was supposed to know and I was angry because Tonya had shared this with her. To settle me a bit, she said to me "Tracy, I know about Hugh. I know how he is and what he's done." Shocked and betrayed, I began to scream the question "why, then, weren't you there for me? How long have you known? I needed you!" She grabbed me, hugged me until I could listen. "What are you talking about?" She asked. She only knew what kind of person he was, and how hard it was for us at home. So Dena really didn't know the secret. Our night was long as I shared our story for only the second time.

It was at that moment I knew I had to get some help and began counseling with our pastor. We had several sessions when he told me I had 3 choices. You can divorce, marry again and repeat without ever gaining any sense of self worth. You can stay like you are and end up in a mental ward. Or you can come clean with your mother and father and quit pretending you are ok. With much hesitation, I called my sister to tell her my plan to meet with our daddy and then a visit with Mother to tell her the truth. That was the first time Tonya and I ever discussed the abuse. She struggled with the guilt of not protecting her little sister. But God is merciful and carries us through. I'm so thankful that we have each other. It was very emotional but very healing and Dena was right there by our side. We then went to tell Daddy. He was a very docile man and outward anger was not in his makeup. He could only say with tears that vengeance was not his but God's and he would have to trust that God was in control. In later conversations with him I knew his anger grew as time went on. We then made our plans

for the next weekend. We met in a hotel room and Mama met us with her vivacious personality then quickly sensed something wrong. We sat down to talk and I literally could not speak. My mama prayed and I blurted out that we have hidden something from her for 25 years. She threw her hands over her face and gasped, "Oh No, not Hugh!" She knew but she didn't know. But now she really knew and had to face the truth. With those words spoken out loud I felt as if demons left my body. We talked for hours answering her questions. She would stop us when she couldn't bear any more.

Her life started to spiral. We all left the weekend very drained. Even though I felt relief, I was so sad because I had just ripped 35 years of my mother's life from her. My mom ended up staying with my stepfather and stated it was because he was so sick and needed to be taken care of. He had no one else. She was thinking he would die soon and no one would have to know. He didn't die. They moved to a small retirement area to try to start a new life. Still alive 19 years later and still controlling. Mama was taking care of a friend that was dying and in her last days she asked my mother to call her husband and check on him from time to time. She did just that and Hugh was very jealous when she would call him. My stepfather went to visit this woman's husband asking him what his plans were with his wife. The man's response was "Well, I love her and I plan to marry her. Would you like a cup of coffee?" Hugh left in a huff and told my mother what he had done. She wouldn't need to worry about this man bothering her anymore. Devastated, she had to strategically make plans to call and apologize because the phones were tapped and Hugh followed her everywhere she went. Finally, she called this man in the wee hours of the morning. Apologizing profusely for Hugh's behavior, this man stopped her and told her what he had said to Hugh. In disbelief, she asked why he told him that. He said, "because it is true. If you don't want any part of it I will never bother you again but if you do, I am here to rescue you." She left Hugh after 47 years and has been happily married to Ken Clark now for 8 years.

Hugh died a year after she left.

Although, it wasn't over night my heart began to open. I began to see the love of God in my husband. I was able to reflect where we had been and what he had been trying to teach me and my children. God had sustained him in a very hard and dark time. His love and passion for God never wavered. It still hasn't. I was able to see God's grace and mercy. God really did love me. God's plan for me was to place me with a God fearing man to join me in my journey so we could understand who He is. I started to understand that serving God is serving my mate, not about my needs. Our journey is far from over. We still have our struggles, heartaches and issues. Life certainly isn't perfect nor do I claim to be. We are still selfish people in need of a

Savior. It is, however, much easier, now, for me to sit back and watch the show because it isn't my show anymore. It is God's.

I heard a sermon once about four young boys diving for golf balls in a local pond. One jumped in the water and pretended he couldn't swim, so the other boys thought. They didn't go after him and he drowned. It was very devastating to the small town and the families involved. As time passed one of the young boys was very driven, got several degrees but couldn't hold a job, therefore, not amounting to much. Another of the three ended up in an insane asylum while the third one committed suicide. It was later confessed that one of the boys pushed the boy who drowned in the pond knowing he couldn't swim as a joke. They couldn't get to him in time. The three boys vowed to each other that it would never be told and the secret destroyed their lives. My husband was out of town and I could not get out of the church fast enough to call him and tell him how sorry I was that I ever put him in that position of keeping my secret. His words to me, "Darlin, I wouldn't change one day!"

Nor would I!