

## Twelve

By Kristin Walker

Twelve is probably the worst age for any child to have a crisis happen at their school. It is an age when everything is embarrassing. I worried about fist fights, tripping on my feet and falling in front of everyone, or a bird pooping on my head during lunch period. Twelve is the age when I began to shed that protective veneer of cluelessness. The world became closer and more noticeable. I was like any other girl excited about almost being a teen. Boys were becoming something more than disgusting. I snuck on lip gloss while riding the bus to school. Clean hair and my wardrobe were newly important obsessions. I didn't want to be a tomboy anymore, because being a girl was very exciting.

One day in my twelfth year of life brought all days of innocence to an abrupt end. For many years, I wished I could have kept my mouth shut and my eyes closed just a little longer. But being quiet was not the road I took. Why should this time be any different? My youth allowed me to take some actions without realizing the consequences. I was too naive to understand that the aftermath of a choice would have a domino effect on my life. It was never the action that horrified me most. It was the public outing of a private horror that made my life stop one day and begin on a radically different course the next.

My private school was small. The classrooms were wall to ceiling windows that faced a courtyard where we played every day. The teachers always closed the heavy drapes while other classes were playing because it was such a distraction. This particular day the drapes in my homeroom were left wide open. When the school bell rang, I gleefully ran out of my math class with my fellow students. Over the PA system, I could hear my name being called and that I was to report to my homeroom immediately. I stopped abruptly when I saw two police officers entering that classroom. My homeroom was right across the courtyard. This was lunch time so every student was out, and they were all staring at me as I took the longest walk of my life. This was the only time that courtyard had ever been so quiet.

I opened the classroom door. My school principal told me to sit at a long table facing the windows. I could see everyone outside with all eyes on me wondering what was going on. One of the officers could barely look at me. He seemed extremely uncomfortable. The other officer, a female, seemed equally uncomfortable but resigned to her task of speaking to me. There were two other people in the room. My math teacher, Mr. Cooper, looked like he was trying to hide amongst the bookshelves. The school principal was sitting next to me. The back of my neck started to burn with humiliation. I wondered why

the drapes were open. Why today? Why was the window open and why was this woman talking so loudly? I wanted to crawl into my skin and disappear.

She asked me why I told Mr. Cooper that my dad touched me “down there.” Not why did my dad do this, but why had I said he did, out loud. This was 1982, just before child abuse became “okay” to report. This was before abusers were visited at their place of work, or in their home, or out in public and asked to discuss what they were doing to children. Sadly, I was on trial and not my father. In fact, he was actually never questioned. It was just me, sitting in this room, with the windows and drapes open. Just me, twelve years old, learning too young what it means to be naked in front of the world.

© 2011 Kristin Walker