

The Snake in the Bedroom

On that day, my grandparents' two-story farmhouse was full of company. Grandma's closest friend in the world, Minnie*, and her husband, Fred*, were there. Even though I was 11, when I spent the night, I would either sleep on a pallet beside Grandma or on the living room couch. I was afraid of "Boo," the ghost from stories I told my cousins as we hid in the big closets. Grandma told me Minnie and Fred would be sleeping upstairs. I shouldn't be scared.

At **bedtime**, I reluctantly went up to the first room at the top of the stairway. It made me feel closer to my **grandparents**. Their room was directly below.

The windows were open to the summer breeze. I could hear the rumbling of Papaw and Grandma's voices as they talked before going to sleep. I heard Papaw pray with her as he did every night. Then I heard their soft snores. It was a security I loved. I fell sound asleep.

The next morning, Minnie went downstairs early to help Grandma fix breakfast and get ready for the fish fry later that day.

The day before, when Fred asked me to sit on his lap and give him a kiss, his hands seemed to stray accidentally. I ignored it, got up quickly, and left thinking I must have been mistaken. Those kinds of imaginary acts happened often when Fred was around. I was keenly aware I was developing quicker than most of the girls in my class. I was the first of the girls I knew to reach **puberty**.

That morning, though, imagination played no part. As I lay asleep, Fred tiptoed into the room. I woke when I heard the door open. I saw him come in. I quickly shut my eyes and pretended to sleep. In my mind, I fervently prayed for God to intervene. But Fred was still there.

"Wake up, little darling," he said. "Come on, time to get up and give your old Fred a kiss."

He leaned his entire body over the bed and gave me a kiss I was sure would bruise my lips. I still pretended to sleep.

He jerked back the sheet. I could feel the morning breeze on my skin. I was well aware my short nightgown covered very little.

"Come on, now. I know you're awake," he said.

In my mind, I pictured Grandma's reaction when she encountered a Copperhead on the path to the creek. She froze. It was her reaction to danger. Following suit, I became a statue. Inside I prayed, "Help me, Jesus. Help me, Jesus. Help me, Jesus."

Every second of the next few minutes is etched indelibly in my mind. His snake-like hands were all over me. I attempted to go elsewhere in my mind to think good thoughts, but it wasn't working. I prayed for God to send Grandma or Minnie up the stairs.

Instead Fred began touching me in places my mother had said boys should not touch me until I was married. The touching felt painful. I willed the tears away. Frozen in time and space my mind went numb, my body limp. I prayed as never before. Again, I begged God to intervene.

I was afraid what Fred might do. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. I was mortified by his actions, and I was sure it wouldn't be long before something very bad would happen. In sheer desperation, I sent up a final, silent prayer: "Help, God. Help."

When no lightning bolt appeared, a million thoughts crossed my mind about how I could stop what appeared to be the inevitable. I could claw his face. I could kick him. I could scream at the top of my lungs. I saw the actions in my mind

but could not make my body move.

Then I heard the answer to my prayer.

"Fred, time for breakfast." It was Minnie's voice calling from the bottom of the stairway just outside the room.

"Be right down, Sugar," Fred called back.

He leaned close and said gruffly in my ear, "Open your eyes."

He smelled of cigar smoke. I disobeyed. My eyes stayed shut. I played dead.

I heard the door close. He had left without doing what I feared. Several seconds passed. It felt like an eternity. The stairs creaked as he descended.

I told no one. I didn't know if the adults would believe me or not.

For years, I felt what he did to me must have been my fault, not his. My blossoming body must have caused him to be led astray.

As an adult, I began to learn more about adult men who molest young girls. Most pedophiles don't molest just one child but many. They choose those who are vulnerable.

Although I will not blame my extreme weight gain on Fred, I do know that from that time on, I was scared of Copperhead men. In many situations, young men tended to take after Fred more than the wonderful role models I had in my father and grandfathers. Those role models made me want to keep trying to find the right man—one of the good guys.

As a kid, all I knew was men like Fred stood their ground, like the Copperhead on the path to the creek. If I was going to be protected, I was going to have to come up with a plan. This plan had to be all-encompassing, something that would

keep Copperheads away.

And so, whether consciously or unconsciously, I began to gain weight.

*Not their real names

*Excerpt adapted from Sweet Grace: How I Lost 250 Pounds and Stopped Trying to Earn God's Favor by **Teresa Shields Parker**. To read more, check out her book, available on Amazon. Teresa is a wife, mom, editor, publisher and business owner who loves to speak and minister to women. She blogs at .*