Reading *Full Body Burden* has been difficult. The reason for the book’s existence is to demonstrate the damaging effects of silence, secrecy and lies on a micro and macro scale. Kristen Iversen makes it a point to intertwine her life’s story with the history of Rocky Flats. By doing this, she allows me to realize the similarities between the silence I endured in my life, those she endured in her life, and the history of the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapon Facility. With these connections to my own life, the main lessons the book teaches are easy to understand, but hard to bear. Silence may seem harmless, but it is a bomb that will eventually destroy something at some time.

Kristen is taught the fine arts of silence and secret-keeping from a very early age. She discovers the concept that there are certain things not to be discussed. It is off-limits to say anything regarding her father’s alcoholism. She carries the burden of secrecy with her throughout her childhood. She and her siblings begin to cease inviting their friends over to their house for fear that they will ask questions. They spend as much time as possible avoiding their home and the uncomfortable secret that resides within it.

I didn’t fully understand this behavior. I would often ask myself why her father’s alcoholism is treated as if it is the secret of Rocky Flats. Alcoholism, after all, is a common issue. The book describes that Kristen’s mother is very proud of her Norwegian heritage and tries to instill that pride within her children. They are raised to be tough Norwegians who don’t complain about anything. That could be a reason. They may also be concerned that a history of alcoholism would impact his law practice. I doubted these conclusions. Only after reflecting on my own childhood did I understand that their refusal to talk about any of the problems in their lives was because of the fear of emotional pain and a possible dissolution of their family unit.
Silence was a major part of my life as well. My family didn’t have an issue with alcoholism; instead, our off-limits discussions concerned the state of poverty in which we lived.

Like Kristen, I never invited friends to my house. They would only ask questions about the lack of food and uncontrollable insect infestation.

I would spend as much time as I could ignoring my household issues by playing video games in the homes of my friends. One day, Child Protective Services excused me from class and interrogated me. They asked about money, food, electricity, drugs, violence, and other incriminating subjects. I never said anything to these people. If I did, I was told that they would likely take me away from my parents to live in foster care. I knew that despite the conditions we lived in, my mother and father loved me. I could not allow myself to be separated from them. I stayed silent and hid our condition out of the fear that revealing ourselves would only cause more damage and cause the family to be forcefully dispersed.

The bonds of a loving family are often thought to be able to withstand any problem. However, *Full Body Burden* debunks this thought. Despite using silence as an attempt to secure the future of their family, Kristen’s father separates from them. Kristen and her siblings all go their different ways. Eventually her mother and father become officially divorced.

In my family, my dad left and I had to leave as well. Silence did not save our families, it did the opposite. During a rebellious fit, I once told my mother that ignoring our problems is the surest way of seeing that they are never solved. I had forgotten those words until this book retaught me that lesson. With the evaporation of Kristen’s family and my own, it is evident that silence is a destructive force that allows for inaction. Inaction then allows for the problems to grow worse and eat away until there is nothing left.

The same concept is true for the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapon Facility. Every worker knew very well what they were creating and what they were taking a part of.

Instead of calling their product a bomb, they referred to it as a gadget. They wanted to ignore the fact that they were the ones making bombs capable of killing millions of people in an instant. Their consciences, it would seem, were unable to handle that.

The workers also stayed quiet about multiple safety issues and failures to meet with environmental and health policies. Failure to meet these policies had the potential to kill their community and destroy the land for thousands of years. They also ignored that ongoing negligence regarding pollution was creating cancer and leukemia in their friends, family and
children. Anyone who revealed the truth about Rocky Flats would lose their paycheck and respect from members of the community. Kristen refers to the Rocky Flats workforce as a big family. Like any family, there was an urge to protect that family.

The reasons the Rocky Flats workforce kept quiet about the dangers the factory presented are numerous. The biggest one was that they needed to protect Rocky Flats because Rocky Flats was producing nuclear weapons that were made to protect the country. Instead of following restrictive policies, they decided that they needed to make as many bombs as possible. Eventually, this short-sightedness resulted in nearly irreversible damage to the environment, lives lost, and the closure of the facility despite their best efforts. The Cold War ended without a nuclear war, leaving their role in the confrontation controversial.

Kristen Iversen concludes at the end of *Full Body Burden* that “to speak out or to remain silent is the first and most crucial decision that we can make.” Silence is destructive. Keeping dangerous secrets only allows for the danger to continue. With that said, speaking up is objectively the better option. It may be hard to do so, and is risky all on its own, but dealing with the problems you face has a higher chance of solving that problem than if you do nothing.

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