

Aroma my Own

It smelled like spring. Stepping out of the school into the early evening air, Sandy stopped, tilted her face toward the setting sun, and breathed in. She filled her lungs with the moist, earthy scent of melting snow, then exhaled slowly; partly because she loved the smell, and partly in relief that the meeting was over.

There had been a bullying incident at the school. Some of the girls from her church had been involved, not as victims but as the bullies. Sandy had been asked to join the guidance counselor in an open discussion with all parties. Five girls from grade seven had been taunting a classmate, newly moved to the school.

The issue?

“Rosie stinks”. “She has B.O. It’s gross”

The truth was, she did, and it was.

The resulting discussion was painful on several fronts: that girls could be so cruel, that they seemed unable to imagine what it would feel like to be on the receiving end, (even though most of them had, for different reasons) but most of all the dull, mute shame of the girl Rosie as she sat through a process that tried to bestow a measure of dignity, and did not. She sat with her head down, picking at what was left of bright red nail polish on nails chewed ragged. The only sound in room was her sneakers, kicking repeatedly against the leg of the orange plastic stacking chair where she sat, hunched and silent.

Sandy and Sharon, the counselor, had talked with them about hormones and hygiene. The girls’ eyes glazed over even as they parroted what the adults expected of them.

“We’re sorry Rosie. Everyone deserves respect”

All the sincerity of a telemarketer.

The final straw was a look that passed between the two girls directly in front of her; a smirk, sneaky and cruel. Sickening. Sandy’s reaction was immediate and intense. She was furious; angrier than the situation called for. Her mouth was dry, and her heart was beating fast. She turned to the three who had been in her church group for over five years.

“Remember the play we did last year?”

Her voice was low and tight. Her hands were shaking. She hoped the girls didn’t notice. She looked directly at Jenna, the ringleader. Jenna did not look back, but a smug little smile played at the corner of the girl’s mouth. It was a side of this child that Sandy had never seen before, and it stung her; it felt – personal, somehow. As though she were the butt of some mean joke she didn’t hear or understand. She tried to shake the feeling and stay with the plan.

“Remember the play?”

“What did your character say? What’s the chorus of the final song?”

They all lowered their eyes. Sandy started it for them, saying the words clearly:

"I am somebody because God loves me..."

No one joined. She continued.

"...and I'm accepted just the way that I am."

"And what about the song we're working on for Easter?" More silence, but two of them looked at her this time. They had never seen her this upset.

"How could anyone ever tell you..." Sandy began, staring them down

"...you're anything less than beautiful?" Melody and Tara mouthed the final words with her.
"How could anyone ever tell you you're less than whole?"

"What do you think that *means*?"

I'm serious Jenna. Melody. Tara. Her voice was rising. *"What do you think that means?"*

She had backed off then, aware that her hands were clenched, and she was losing her focus.

Sharon had taken over the lead, with a worried glance in Sandy's direction. They brought the session to a close with a deal to meet next week for a review. Each girl would have an individual meeting with either of the adults. Most chose Sharon.

"You ok?"

Sharon was gathering up her things after the girls had slunk out into the freedom of the schoolyard. Sandy knew how they felt.

"Fine."

Sharon looked. Snapped her briefcase shut.

"Well, not really."

She slung it over one shoulder; looked some more.

"I need to think; get some distance on this. I'll get back to you, ok?"

Silence.

"I'm fine, honest."

Sharon let it go, and they went their separate ways in the parking lot.

It was late March. The main street that passed the school ran with muddy water, and the remaining snow was laced through with sand where the plough had pushed it back. Butterscotch ripple snowbanks.

Walking home, Sandy tried to identify the source of her reaction. She deliberately walked through, not around, the deepest mud puddles. She had done it from the time she was little; a comforting, earthy pleasure. The coldness on her feet through her duck boots, and the smell of muddy water was pure childish delight. Something caught her eye, shining at the bottom of a shallow puddle. A penny? She stooped to pick it up. “Aha – good luck!” she said out loud. But on closer inspection it turned out to be only a piece of broken brown glass, probably a beer bottle, half buried in the mud. Not knowing why, she wiped it off on the sleeve of her jacket and pocketed it like a talisman. Not all charms are obvious to everyone.

By the middle of the 10th puddle she had it worked out. It didn’t take a rocket scientist; she was preparing to move. Even thinking about it; saying it out loud in her mind, brought a tightening of her stomach. “By July I’ll be gone from here.”

A car honked, the driver waved. She waved back, and stopped to look up and down the street. She had come to this little town as a young, eager and newly ordained minister. Full of ideas, and hope, and a night-crawling fear that she wasn’t good enough. Had she truly been called to this work? Every fiber of her being said yes. Somewhere, though, a voice from the darkness said “You’re no good; you’re a fraud; wait ‘til they find out who you REALLY are”.

Eight years later, she was leaving. What had happened in those 8 years was now in review, not only by Sandy herself but by the congregation, as they began a search for a new minister. The process was prescribed by the National church, and began with a review of her work, and questioning the congregation about what kind of ministry they wanted *now*.

Sandy was absolutely unprepared for the impact of this move on her. Through the sleepless nights and subsequent headachy days that led to her decision, she realized how deeply she had become enmeshed in this place. Once her decision was made, though, she naively thought the worst was over.

Nothing, however; *nothing* had prepared her for the reactions of anger and betrayal from people she considered friends; her own guilt for abandoning many mid stream in a spiritual journey; the roller coaster of one day wanting to change her mind and stay, the next day wanting to sneak off that night and have it over with. Worse than all of that, was the panic and resurfacing of the old inadequacies. The voice from the darkness said:

“It’s all been an exercise in futility. You haven’t made one bit of difference here; just look at those girls today. Two years from now they won’t be able to remember your name”

But no, another voice said. I’ve done good work here. I’ve given my heart to these people. They’re my family; they’re my friends.

“That’s right” the hot questioning spread, like heroin through the veins of an addict. “and what are you going to do without them? Thought you belonged, didn’t you? Though you’d found a family? Well now what? Who will be your family now?”

I’ll be fine. I did a good job here, and I made friends and I can do it again. I’ll be just fine.

“Ok maybe you did fine *here* but in the next church you’ll be found out as the faker you really are.”

Charlotte called them “mice with megaphones”. The voices. Voices that sound so loud during a sleepless night. In truth they’re small and insignificant and can be trapped by a mouldy bit of cheese, but the noise they make can scare the bejeepers out of someone who doesn’t know where it’s coming from.

She shook her head, and to chase the mice away, began to sing the chorus that had helped her make this decision, and carried her through its aftermath:

*“but I can laugh, and I can cry, sometimes failing, still I’ll try
falling down, I’ll touch the sky My dreams can take me to the heights
There are no answers, say the wise, Not much light to fill my eyes
But let the music in me rise And I’ll go singing in the night”*

So it was one step at a time that took her home, to the beat of the song in her head, through the mud and misty spring air. By the time she arrived at the back door of the manse – Drat! Her sheets were still on the line; damp with dew by now.

“Should have taken them off before I left for the meeting. Ah well, they can stay there until morning. And I love the way they smell after a night on the line.”

She opened the kitchen door that was hardly ever locked. That’s one thing she would miss about this place, among...among so many others. Grief for it all hit her again, like a whiff of ammonia, bringing unexpected tears to her eyes. She shook her head...

“Stop now. Just stop. You can’t be doing this every time you think of it.”

She entered, kicked off her shoes, flipped the light switch and threw her purse onto the nearest chair. The one with her grandmother’s afghan draped over the back. Not one colour in it matched the kitchen but hey – some things are worth more than a colour scheme.

“Honey, I’m home”

She never got tired of saying that.

A thunk on the ceiling above her told her she had been heard. Seconds later, the sound of feet on the stairs and Honey rounded the corner, blinking a sleepy greeting.

“Don’t ask” Sandy said.

Honey didn’t.

“Tell me about your day instead. No, let me guess.”

She looked at the food dish. Empty.

“You ate all the cat chow, slept, and watched for birds out the living room window. Am I right?”

Honey's look said "don't tell me you wouldn't do it if you could"

She checked the fridge – a piece of mouldy cheese, bread, and pickles.

"Alrighty then! A can of soup it is. Let me see...chicken. Perfect."

Supper, such as it was, over, she headed for her office. On the way, she passed the big black treadmill in the hallway, its handles drooping with a sweater, two tote bags and her favourite flannel shirt. She hadn't exercised in months. Not regularly, at least, not since... Averting her eyes from the guilt inducing sight, she flopped into the office chair.

"Might as well try to keep going on Sunday's sermon"

An attempt earlier in the week had been thwarted by her lack of concentration. She sat at the big old desk. Her desk. Her desk that soon would be someone else's.

Stop it!

She began to read.

A few minutes later, cars pulled into the parking lot of the church. She watched from the office window – a moment of panic. Had she forgotten a meeting? A quick look at her day book said no. But there was Alma, and Frances and Bill, Ken and ...

Oh.

The new search committee.

No wonder she didn't know. She wasn't invited. The committee elected to find her replacement was meeting next door. Right now. She watched as they greeted each other, laughing, sharing the day's events. Just as if...as if life would go on without her. She felt it in her gut; a nauseous clenching in her stomach (Isn't that what they say? Your stomach is the size of your fist? Well, hers right now was tight, ready for a fight.)

What did she expect? That they'd crumble and fold, unable to function if she weren't there?

These strong, faithful people who had taken their turn at keeping this church going for its 150 years of life, did she actually think that her departure would make a difference to them?

There they were, getting ready, Alma would be the secretary. Alma was always the secretary.

Ken would chair – he liked that. And they would find a new minister and they would keep on being the faith community that she had been embraced by and grown to love. They would embrace someone new and keep going. That was good.

Wasn't it?

Sandy forced her eyes away from the window, and back to the text. "If I can get this done tonight" she told herself, "I can rest easy for the weekend and enjoy the movie on Saturday night"

Yea, right.

Concentration. It came hard these days. Her mind and heart were everywhere. At the most inappropriate moment, her brain would disengage. In a conversation about the budget yesterday, for example, Sandy began daydreaming about the colour of the bathroom in her new manse, and whether her towels would match.

"Concentrate." She told herself.

“Just read the text”

She did.

“Six days before Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot one of his disciples, the one who was about to betray him, said why was this perfume not sold for 300 dinarii and the money given to the poor? He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it. Jesus said, leave her alone – she bought it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you but you do not always have me.”

She sat in silence, letting the fragrance linger. What gift was here for her? There was one; of that, Sandy had no doubt. Without fail, the scriptures always waited; swollen droplets ready to burst under the warmth of her silence. When she took the time to listen, watch, and inhale deeply, they melted and gave up their secrets. Like those pine-scented bath beads she loved as a kid: round, with bright colours, they dissolved in the tub, leaving a rubbery shell. She and her sisters had made a game of who could find that shell first when they bathed together as toddlers. She smiled at the memory.

“Hey, now *there’s* an image describing how we sometimes approach the Bible.” she grinned.

“We’re like a tub full of people, all jockeying to grasp a rubbery empty shell between our wrinkled fingers when in fact, the real goodness is everywhere, spicing the very water that warms and cleanses the graspers. Hmmm”. She filed it away. Good, but not for now.

Concentrate.

She shook her head. This was impossible. It would be nice to preach this stuff sometimes as though...as though it didn’t matter. Deliver a speech on Biblical culture; a lecture on morals. Something that didn’t cut to the quick, or burrow into unsuspecting hearts and tender places. With every sermon she wrote, she saw before her the faces of the people who would be listening; she knew them intimately by now; their lives, their fears and joys...and she read the text each week with all that in her heart, wanting to go deep, and deeper yet, to break open the Word so that they all, including Sandy herself, so that they all could encounter the living Word and leave a bit more free.

Today – today wasn’t looking good for going deep. Today she’d be lucky to get to the depth of a mud puddle. Why couldn’t she do this?

Plan B. Phone Charlotte.

Her fingers knew the number by heart. Within seconds she was complaining to the only person in the world she trusted with her fear.

“I just can’t get my head into this Char – it’s not working.”

“What’s going on?”

Charlotte was crunching something around the words. Probably peanuts. The sound gave Sandy a perfect image of her friend, the way she always held the peanuts in one palm and made circular, swishing movements before she shoveled them into her mouth...she could almost smell them.

“Well there’s that worship meeting tomorrow that I have to get ready for, you know, and I have an appointment with Heather at 2, and”

Charlotte cut her off. No peanut noise this time.

“Sandy!”

Sandy stopped, mid sentence.

“I mean what’s going ON.”

Oh

Well, that’s why she had reached out to her friend, right? She cut to the chase without apology, and more than that, Charlotte had a built in fog detector. With her, Sandy couldn’t give the easy answer, fuzzy and indistinct. She inhaled deeply.

“Ok. Here goes. Have you got time for this?”

More crunching. She should watch her cholesterol, but this wasn’t the time to bring that up. Charlotte would see that as distraction from the point of the call. Which it was. Why couldn’t she concentrate?

“All the time in the world. Until 8:30. You’ve got an hour and ten minutes. So shoot”

“I don’t know what’s wrong – there’s this great text for Sunday and I’ve been trying all week to get into it and I just can’t. I love this text. I’ve preached it before, done the background work, its not that. I don’t get it.”

“Read it to me”

She did

.

Silence.

The crunching began again. It meant Charlotte was thinking.

“Ok let’s play with this the way I play with the kids at school. Story time. You be the woman. Mary, right?”

“Yea. The way John tells it. Matthew Mark and Luke don’t give her name but John says she was Mary of Bethany.”

“Mary. Good. Ok you be Mary. I’ll beI’ll be one of the disciples. Ok?”

“Ok. I’m Mary.”

“See? I knew you could concentrate! Remind me to give you a big sticker. So Mary...talk to me. What’s going on here? What brought you to your knees?”

Sandy sat back in her chair, closed her eyes, felt her way into the scene.

Charlotte interrupted. Charlotte didn’t like silence.

“Describe the scene. Lighting? Props?”

“Ok...it feels dark in here. Evening. Lamplight, not a lot of it. It smells like they just finished supper, baked bread smell, oil from the lamps, and spices. The people sitting at the table are in shadows, but...

“but what?”

“but I can feel their disapproval. Almost smell it.”

“Good. I’m one of them. What’s my problem?”

“um...my brother Lazarus is here. Jesus raised him from the dead; you’re there to see if it’s true. You’re afraid, I think.”

“Are YOU afraid, Mary?”

Sandy’s response was immediate.

“No. I’m not. Not at all. I know they’re dangerous, some of them out to get Lazarus, and Jesus too. I know that, but I’m not afraid. I’m...

I’m thankful. Yeah. Thankful and peaceful, that’s how it feels.”

“Ok, so what are you doing with that perfume?”

“It belongs to our family. It’s really expensive; meant to be used at burial, for preserving the body. Lazarus is now alive again, and this is the stuff that we were going to use when he died. Jesus raised him; it’s a way of saying thanks. My sister and I together decided what to do with it. Give it to Jesus.”

“Your sister?”

“Yes Charlotte – Martha. She’s Mary’s, I mean *my* sister. Remember?”

“But do you two get along? Isn’t she the one who’s always complaining that you don’t help out in the kitchen? Or am I projecting my own sister onto a Sunday school lesson? Don’t know what her problem was anyway....I really did have to use the bathroom every time the dishes had to be done.”

“No, you’re right, that’s what people think. But really, that’s not true. If you check it out in John 11 where Lazarus died, it’s Martha who goes out of the house to meet Jesus and has this incredible theological conversation with him, and it’s Mary who stayed home that time. So all that “Mary/Martha split” idea just doesn’t hold up if you read the actual Bible.”

“Sheesh. People oughtta know that.” Crunch crunch.

“Yes, they should. Nobody, not even Biblical characters, should be type-cast. Too easy. You don’t have to work that way. Don’t have to be real. It’s like I said to the Bible study group on Thursday...”

Charlotte cut her off.

“Sandy? Back to the *text*?”

“Ok, ok. But what I was going to say was going to be relevant.”

“Maybe. I think you’re trying to get out of this. No wonder you couldn’t write your sermon. You have the attention span of a gnat. Which is probably unfair to gnats. And which is why you called me, so get back to it.” Sandy could hear the grin in her voice. She was right.

“Ok so what was I saying? Oh yea. Martha and I decided together that we’d thank Jesus for saving our brother by giving him the ointment. But it was me, I mean I, who took it and poured it out that way. It was an impulse – I was caught up in the moment and just...just did it.”

“Ok. And I’m one of them in the room who saw it happen and I think you’re nuts. Why would you waste something so expensive? And isn’t it true that women in those days kept their hair

covered in public, especially around men? So - what's that about – wasn't that pretty brazen Miss Mary? What were you thinking?"

Silence.

"I wasn't thinking. It's not *about* thinking. It's about doing what you know you have to do. It's about...doing something with your whole heart, no matter what people say, no matter how they judge what you've done. Pouring it right out there for everyone to see, your most intimate treasure for everyone to smell."

Her voice was rising, her throat ached, tight and raw.

Ok, sometimes Charlotte knew to let her be still. Five seconds of silence. Ten.

"And then what?" she whispered finally.

"And then I felt – embarrassed. Ashamed. I felt their disapproval before I heard them speak. It was...it was like I had exposed myself; followed my heart, given my best, and it wasn't good enough. It wasn't good enough."

Sandy was crying now. She pulled her knees up to her chest, pressed her face into them, and simply sobbed. Honey leapt up onto the desk, sat down on the open Bible, and gently pushed her forehead against Sandy's arm. The gesture, uncharacteristically kind from her animal friend, made her cry all the harder.

Finally she sniffed loudly. "I have to put down the phone and blow – hang on."

"Great. This is just -great. Very helpful. Now I have a headache and I look like hell. And I still don't have a sermon." She laughed, just a bit.

Charlotte's voice was soft. Unusually so.

"Listen Sandy, don't do this to yourself. You know what's going on here – it's too close for comfort. Just this once, give yourself a break. Go on the net. Google the text. Read an inspirational poem to them – anything. Get a sermon from somewhere – one that won't tear you apart. You don't have to do this. Sometimes you give too much. It's like you're pouring out your

-

She stopped, connection made.

"woah!"

almost to herself.

"Yeah. Woah!"

Even Charlotte's peanut chomping stopped. The phone line connecting them hummed; something on the line crackled. In the fading light of this spring evening, as her office increased in shadow, there they were; the fleshed and the fleshless: Sandy herself, deep in grief and the vulnerability of having given her all; her friend, a voice at the other end of a bad connection; a group of faithful friends next door, preparing to move on; and this woman, Mary, clad only in ink and the whim of the story teller. All of them connected as time and distance bunched together like the folds of a robe scrunched into the fists of a woman who is preparing to dance for joy. And the fragrance of it filled the whole room.

“