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The Woman Who Smelled Money

MELISSA KALINOWSKI

I'm watching for the first time the musical, "The Sound of Music". This is the part when the children frolic in their new curtain clothes. I start to think *we all grow up*. We cease to remain those small girls with braids like chains, barrettes in their tousled hair, wishing for ponies or whatever it is little girls throw their dreams upon.

Little boys become husbands, heroes, warriors overnight. They leave behind smooth colored stones, footballs, and scraped knees for a quest.

Children start out unjaded, fantastical, and true. There are notions we all have about life, our parents, the roles we are resigned to fill in the face of their heavy, moonlike wonder.

I remember clearly the humid July night where the very act of moving meant work, work equaled sweat, and sweat was what we were doing in our sleep, while we ate, dripping away in our hearts. So, it was decided against, and my mother, sister, and myself sat silent and fixed in front of the television, watching the quick movements of the screen.

"Kids," my mother announces to us, "we've got to get out of here. We've got to do something!"

My mother-her big, soft, liquid eyes that I used to look into while she read to me from collections of books she ordered through the mail-despite my father's firm resistance, is up on her tall brown sandals pacing, upturning magazines from tables, opening cabinet drawers, creating small winds from her hurried movements around the room. My sister and I sit on the couch amused, cooled, and wishing

she would continue her tirade against the heat continuing to produce small gusts of her perfumed breezes.

“There money in this house. I just know it. And if we can find it we could go out, do something, get ice cream, watch a movie—anything,” she looks at us as if this were her campaign speech for the presidency or as if she’s asked us to help her rob a bank, be accomplices, spring an unlucky friend from jail.

“I told you I could smell money, right?,” she looks at us, bending close so we see her lipstick grin.

By now, my sister Mindy looks at me. I look back. You need to understand my mother a bit. She was the mom that threw us wonderful birthday parties with all of our friends, even the ones that weren’t—kids who happened to live on our street. She let us eat candy—lots, she took us swimming every day in the summer, sang along to the radio in the car, gave us a familiar magic, craziness, wonder and spontaneity. Such notions moved her on July nights when she made us believe she could smell money, like a bloodhound, as an art, a parlor trick to excite the neighbors, a sixth sense.

“Well if I never told you, I’m telling you now. Your father has money hid in this house someplace—my nose is twitching. If you help me search, we can get out of here”, she says smoothing her hair to reveal her long delicate neck.

We believe her and start searching. I know now that my father was rather prudent, penny pinching, in dealing with the family’s financial matters, and it was a simple fact that my mother knew he would hide money from her so she could not spend it. But inside a child’s mind, in the face of my mother, I was ready to believe she could sniff it out and take us out of there. I conjured up thoughts that my mother had a keen, if not odd predisposition to locate money because she was aware of the specific smell that the green dye the paper gave off. I wondered if God blessed her with such a gift, knowing full well she would marry my father and have to save her change like fallen stars, birds nests, the treasure that it was.

My sister and I were busy looking behind the couch, lifting the curtains, finding broken crayon ends, a couple of dimes huddled together for safety, and the remains of the crackers I had been eating the night before. There was no vast treasure chest spilling forth gold bars, silver goblets, and packs of hard, crisp one hundred-dollar bills.

"We don't see anything mom," we grumbled in unison and through a thick shame. We did not want our mother to see our wavering faith. My sister looked to me, shaking her head as if to say she's lost it, the gift we never knew she had, is gone.

My mother kept searching. My sister and I did as well, only half heartedly, kicking up pillows, searching the floor, dreaming for creaky loose boards, trap doors where a booty and cache might be found.

It was when my mother took apart the antique chair, whose insides were held together by sharp, brass, tack like buttons, that I began to feel her momentum. Inside she found nothing but kept smiling. She came upon the tall, fake gold, freestanding ashtray of my father's and the room became silent like memories or ghosts.

"Here?," she indicated, pointing her tiny finger at the cheap ashtray made to give our living room the appearance of class. She held her dainty button nose in the air, hovering above the ashtray, one nostril perked up, one eye gave us a blue wink of eyeshadow.

Slowly, with the carefulness of cleaning up broken glass, her long brown arm slid down the neck of the ashtray. She had reached the hollow base and let her smile gather in potential. You could hear her nails catch the surface and curl around something, some object of definite mass, worth.

"I told you I could do it. I smell money," she said, tapping her index on the tip of her nose, "I suspected it was here all along."

Her hand withdrew from the gold wreckage to display a wad of dollar bills gingerly held together by a faded forlorn rubber band. She held the green beauty up like a caught Bass, with the pride for a new baby. She was beaming and

while she loosened the roll of money into her hands, she delighted in each president's numbered smile.

I believe we went shopping that evening, or the next morning. What we bought and where are a mystery and mean nothing in comparison to the fact that I learned my mother held promise, magic untapped, in her carefree body.

* * * * *

This was my childhood. My thoughts and fancies were of the unknown. Science, math and all their facts, rules, and laws meant little to me if they didn't produce the imaginative, that crawl space of the mind where you come out dirty and everyone asks where you've been. My mother awakened dreams in me. She was binding. She was my religion and I held tight to what she could teach me. And I see children today, with hands held by parents, wondrous eyes looking up. I see all over again the flashes and moments when my youth comes alive. I see my mother; her quirky way of raising two children on her own while my father was busy working, away.

"Do you know what time it is?" my mother asks, clearly trying to sound authoritative, official, all knowing.

"It's time for you two to go to bed, way past that time actually," she says lifting my sister and I from our dolls, and like a movie theatre attendant ushers us half way up the stairs, motioning to our bedroom.

This is where I start laughing in my reverie as I think to that night. I try and tell people this story and it either doesn't work, or they don't get it, or they laugh along with me but walk away with an even more curious view of me and my upbringing.

"I don't want to go to bed. I'm not tired," I say. And I'm not. I want to finish watching the midnight movie starring Farrah Fawcett or some other blonde starlet who seems to always get cast in roles where the part demands her to be a battered woman, a woman who goes to jail, must flee the state with her kids to go into hiding, or kills a man—in self defense or a moment of insanity of course. There are al-

ways a lot of car crashes, buildings burning, and tears by the young actress as she vows to change her life, leave her man, or turn things in her life secret where the rest of the world is concerned. This usually means a, to be continued, will be read on the bottom of the screen when the movie is about to end.

My mother sighs and gives me a look that means submission. She utters the two words I wait to hear, the two words that give us a special pact, a secret world all our own.

“When who,” she says, and I dutifully prance up to the bedroom I share with Mindy to pretend to fall asleep.

You see, *when who*, is short for: *when you know who goes to bed* (meaning Mindy), then, and only then, can I come back down and rejoin my mother and Farrah and be a big girl, staying up late, ignoring rules, a confidant, an equal with my mother. Once again, this is my childhood; my mother smells money and at times shows favoritism to her children through late night mischief and adventure.

I lay in bed in the dark, listening to the sound of my sister’s shallow breathing. It’s all a little morbid, now that I look at it. It’s as if I’m waiting for my sister to slowly die. Her breaths coming more silent and even now, as I wait for her to slip into that oblivion of sleep where she is lost, gone, and I can leave her alone, and steal away back to my mother and the night, where things are different and all your own.

“Pssst! Are you awake,” I hiss at Mindy. There is no answer, just the hint of a moan where I can tell she is drifting, in her slumbers like water, wading. Oftentimes she is still awake, and may have trouble falling asleep quickly. She will answer back that no, she is not asleep but awake. Then I say I was just wondering and wait longer, all the while anxious as to what I may be missing down below. But tonight is easy as I uncover my legs from the blankets. I walk in tiptoes down the hall dodging imaginary landmines that may explode and wake my sister. I travel the seven stairs before I take my place on that last step, the one right where the spindled railing begins, and I wait for my mother to see me, motion me down with a wave of her hand, where

she looks like she doesn't want to give in but she does. She is just as lonely down here without me as Mindy is in our room where we've pushed the furniture together to make one big bed.

I take my spot next to her, wrap myself in her quilt and eat the popcorn she has made for me the moment she knew I'd be back. This is *when who*. Mindy is asleep and I can stay up with the stars and my mom, quiet, whispering my take on the movie and the hard lessons they try to teach.