

The Lesson

When Sarah slid her teddy bear down the shiny banister rail of the main staircase we all wanted it. It had silky brown fur and floppy ears, far too long for a bear – more like a bunny. We ached to cuddle it and smooth that fur, rub the ears through our fingers. Sarah let us touch it, if she really liked us. She sat it on her desk where it watched her working. It watched me too, so I was a bit special. Anna said it was watching her too, and Pauline.

We all sat near Sarah. At breaktime Sarah took the teddy up to the toilet with her, dancing it on the banister rail and talking to it. The ears flopped about as it jiggled on its wooden slide. The sunlight through the big window on the landing - the width of the whole stairs - shone on the silky curls of its fur so it had a halo of light as we looked up at it. It made it a very holy bear. Only saints and Mary and Jesus have haloes. Pauline offered Sarah some chocolate which she took, but she still didn't let Pauline hold the bear.

By lunch time we were tired of wanting the bear, so we went off to play horses near the hedge at the bottom of the playground, near the hen run. You could pretend to tie your horse to the hedge, and could paw the ground just like the chickens did when they were scratching for food. When it got boring one of the big girls showed us how to pull a long thin stick out of the hedge, strip off the leaves, and use it as a whip for the horses. She swished it through the air and it made a humming noise. It moved so fast that when her arm had the stick down near her leg I could still see where it had been up in the air above her shoulder. It made me blink. She showed me how to hold it in a fist down by my side and twitch my wrist so it just tickled the horse. My pretend horse reared up and whinnied and we all went galloping around the playground, left hand at chest height holding the reins and the other tickling with the whip-stick.

When Sister Gregory came out to ring the bell at the end of lunchtime Sarah suddenly came running out behind her. She was all noise, screaming "Where's my bear? Where's my bear? Who's taken it? Where is it?"

We had so much forgotten it that it took a moment to realise what she meant. Then we bounced back the questions - "Where's your bear? What have you done with it? What's happened?"

Through heaving sobs, with Sister Gregory holding her steady, it came out that the bear had got very tired, and so Sarah had put it to bed in her satchel while she had lunch. When she had gone back to wake it up, it had gone.

Sister Gregory's face changed. It went all firm-looking, as if her chin had had something hard put in it. Her head lifted, like ours did when we were playing horses and pretended to sniff the wind.

“We'll get to the bottom of this, Sarah, I promise you,” she said. We all felt frightened and kept very still, even though we hadn't done anything. Sister Gregory was scary when she went cold like this. Sarah stopped crying. The cold must have reached her too. She walked back, holding Sister's hand. She was suddenly very important.

We went in to the classroom for registration and prayers. Sister Gregory told us to be very quiet while we had our rest time, with the lady on the radio telling us a story, and we were to place our heads on the desk because she was going to see Mother Veronica. She left the door wide open so she would know if any of us moved or made a noise (but God would know anyway). To start with we carefully moved our heads around to look at everyone else to see how they were reacting, but gradually we stopped looking, and listened to the story, and dozed a bit. Sarah went to sleep with her thumb falling out of her mouth.

At the end of rest time, Sister Gregory came in and said we all had to go to the hall as Mother Veronica wanted to speak to us. That meant something really big had happened. It was very exciting.

We went to the dining hall which was also our assembly hall and all the other classes were there too. Mother Veronica came in, leaning on a stick and moving very slowly. She stood up to talk, but leaned one arm on the table in front of her and held on to the stick. When she spoke she was very angry and she shook, especially her head, as if the anger wanted to come out but couldn't find the way. Like Sister Gregory she was quiet and angry, not like my mother who could only be loud when she was cross, and would shout and scream, and even throw things and kick out. I would laugh at Mummy, but we wouldn't laugh at Mother Veronica. We watched her spit fly on to the table and beyond. I was glad I wasn't in the front row – I might have been hit by it. She kept licking her bottom lip so it looked wet and soft and pink. Even from the fifth row, I could see her eyebrows twitching, so she had to keep putting her glasses straight. She had to keep stopping because she was breathing as if she had run up the

stairs but she hadn't, she had come down them, and very slowly too. Even the hairs on her chin were wiggling around – everything about her was angry and shaking and old.

She wanted the truth. She wanted whoever had taken Sarah Taylor's teddy bear to own up. She wanted the teddy bear given back. She wanted anyone who knew anything about it to go and tell her what they knew. She wanted information. Whoever had taken that teddy bear was a thief. Stealing was a sin. It was breaking one of the ten commandments – someone had coveted Sarah's teddy bear. Even if she, Mother Veronica, did not know yet who had taken that bear, God knew – and God would punish the thief – unless... unless that person came forward and confessed, and gave back the bear.

No-one moved. No-one looked at anyone else. We froze, waiting for God to show us who had stolen the bear. Nothing happened. God was playing Peep Behind the Curtain with us – He wouldn't show us anything while we were looking. Despite this we kept sneaking quick glances, as you do, to catch someone by surprise. There was a long silence.

Mother Veronica shut her eyes and nodded her head, then wobbled out, leaning on a nun's arm and the stick. She was bent over, so she wasn't any taller than the big girls.

Sister Gregory held us there for a further moment. We should all sit in silence for a moment while we thought about what had happened. We should consider whether we knew anything that might help to find the thief. We would all go back to class now, but anyone who knew anything must go up to Mother Veronica's study, knock on the door and then wait to speak to Mother Veronica, to tell all.

After a few minutes we were allowed to go back to class. We went silently and returned to our desks. Sister Gregory said we would have nature study now, so we were invited to tell her about the leaves we had brought in the day before, which we were going to draw this afternoon. It had started to feel normal again when there was a knock on the door and one of the big girls came in. She said that Mother Veronica wanted to see Benedict Benson. Sister Gregory just nodded her head silently, looking at Benedict with deep suspicion. A trapped animal, he twisted his head from side to side – we were no help, looking at him with horror. He went out with the girl.

Now one desk was empty.

Benedict! Benedict Benson, the bully.

We didn't like him because he hurt us. He would barge into people even when there was lots of room. He was very noisy too, shouting in your face and flapping his hands around so that you thought he was going to hit you. Sometimes, if you ducked to miss him you got hit anyway, so it was best to keep still. He was dirty too. His socks were always falling down because they had no elastic left in them, and he had to keep pulling his shorts up because they had growing room, so his skinny little legs looked silly coming out of the bottom, and he smelt of Marmite. I like Marmite on toast but not on people. His hair was long and straight and hung over his eyes unless he pushed it away, or flicked his head to make it swing back. Just last week he slid down the banisters of the main stairs – the big, curving staircase - and hit everyone he passed, really hard. I didn't like him. I'd always wanted to slide down the banisters – but the most we dared was to run down the stairs when no-one was looking, with a hand on the wood, whose smoothness hurried us down. We were always being told not to leave our sticky fingerprints on it, because the sun from the big windows on the stairs showed up all the marks - but the curve of the wood just pulled your hand towards it. Benedict was naughty to slide down the banisters but if we said anything he just flicked our ears from behind and it hurt.

Still, to have to go to see Mother Veronica. We wondered what he knew. The empty chair and desk were Benedict-not-there. When we had to get our leaves to draw we avoided that chair, just as we did when Benedict sat on it.

After a while of drawing the drying leaves there was another knock on the door. Sister Gregory called to come in. The big girl came in again but this time said that Mother Veronica wanted Sarah to go up to her study and that she wanted Benedict Benson's satchel, which was hanging on his chair. Sister Gregory said she would take Sarah and the satchel, and once again the door was left open so she could hear anything naughty that we did (but God knew anyway) and they went out to the hall, pausing at the bottom of the stairs. We could hear the footsteps going up the big staircase, with the shiny banister rail that Benedict had come sliding down only a few days ago.

We stayed very quiet.

Doors opened and closed. Feet squeaked on the lino. Nuns' skirts swished a bit. The leaves dried out a bit more. Then we heard the door open and someone crying. The whimpers came down the long stairs. Sister Gregory brought in Sarah, who was sniffing into a hankie, settled her at her desk and then sat at the teacher's desk. No-one made a sound – just the noise of Sarah's sniffing and gasping. The door was left open – the bottom of the stairs, with the curving banister rail, just in view.

Sister Gregory lifted her chin again. "We know who took Sarah's teddy bear," she said.

We waited. Sarah's sniffs became louder.

"It was Benedict Benson," she announced.

There was a slight movement. We didn't mind at all that it was Benedict. We didn't mind him getting told off, or God knowing he was a thief. He could cope with God if anyone could. God would have His hands full with that one.

"He was seen by Nicholas McGuire from the top class," she continued, "so there is no doubt about it. However, Benedict Benson is a very naughty boy. He is a wicked child, and Mother Veronica and I are shocked by his behaviour."

We nodded. Yes, he was wicked to steal Sarah's teddy bear. Sister Gregory hadn't finished. She nodded over at Sarah.

"You can see poor Sarah crying there."

We could.

"And you must be wondering why she hasn't got her bear."

We started to wonder.

"It's because – " and Sister Gregory had to swallow and control her anger. Her nostrils opened wider. "It's because that wicked little boy has cut up the bear. He has cut off its ears and stabbed its body so the stuffing is coming out."

We all pictured the bleeding body of the silky brown bear, now without its floppy ears. I thought it would be nice to have one of those ears. I

could see why Benedict might have cut them off – I too had seen them as quite separate from the bear. Sarah’s sobbing got worse.

“That bear was a present to Sarah from her Grandma, and she is very upset by what has happened. So Benedict will be punished.” Her voice went quieter. “That’s not all I’m afraid. It gets worse.”

The pause made us wonder – what else could there be? What was worse than mutilating that little bear and making Sarah cry?

“Benedict told lies. He denied it. Fortunately Nicholas had seen him putting something in his satchel. It was the teddy bear – or what was left of it.”

A collective shudder around the classroom. We looked at where the satchel had been. We had been so close to that mutilated body.

“As you know, we will not tolerate lying in this school. Mother Veronica will have to punish him very severely.”

There was a long pause.

There was a scuffle going on upstairs. We realised that Benedict was being dragged across the landing upstairs. Even Sister Gregory looked up, as if to God, and waited to see what would happen.

We heard Benedict crying. We’d never heard him crying before. He kept saying “No” and saying “It wasn’t me.” He shouted, “It was Nick – look in his bag.” He yelled, “Nick had some scissors – go and look”.

It was a shock. I didn’t like him but I didn’t like to hear him cry and sound as if he were begging. He sounded desperate – the crying was almost a scream, but it was interrupted by grunts and scuffles. Was he fighting with the nuns? Was it they who were making little noises of pain? There were slapping sounds. Who?

Sister Gregory got up to shut the door, then hesitated. She turned to face the class.

“It won’t do you any harm to hear this,” she said, and sat down again. She shook her head. “He still won’t own up.”

She watched our faces as we listened. We sat looking at the bottom of the stairs, with the sunlight falling from the big windows down to the floor outside our door, like in a picture of God.

We heard Mother Veronica murmuring – perhaps a prayer over Benedict? Then a swishing noise that I’d heard before but couldn’t remember where. Then, as heads had started to turn to each other, puzzled at the sound, there came a hum then a sharp crack and Benedict screamed. He carried on screaming as the crack noise came again and again. Six times it came. Then it stopped. The screams were suddenly muffled as if someone had covered his face. Mother Veronica was talking again. The murmur stopped. The screaming noise carried on then, unmuffled for a while before it started to die down. It became sobs – sobs that tore at us, as we listened.

Sister Gregory spoke.

“Benedict Benson was a very naughty boy. Mother Veronica has whipped him for his lying. Let that be a lesson to you all.”

The picture of Mother Veronica, with her wispy beard and wet lower lip and bristling white eyebrows, did not fit with a whip - I only knew our pretend whips from lunchtime, to make the horses go faster – bits of bendy sticks which tickled. Where did wobbly, shaky old Mother Veronica get the strength from, to make the cane whip through the air and crack with that regular rhythm on Benedict’s body with its too-big shorts and the silly little legs? Where?

The bell went for the end of the nature study lesson. Down the big staircase, where the God-sunlight had fallen on a haloed bear - down the shiny banister rails, polished and smooth for a naughty boy to slide on - came the sound of a child sobbing.

The lesson was over.

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Martine MacCormack Jan/Feb 2021