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Bruised Reeds

James Calvin Schaap

Grandpa said there was a fine walleye chop this morning—“just about perfect,” he said—so he left early in the boat. Abby knew better. It had been her grandpa’s idea for her to come up to the lake, by herself, for a good long weekend, leaving Gregg behind, Grandpa’s idea because he figured he knew what she needed: alone time. And that’s why he’d left this morning too, walleye chop or not. He’d asked if she wanted to come with. She’d said no—that was just fine too. Grandpa thought he knew.

But then everybody thought they knew what she needed since Emma had been killed.

Abby had taken a packet of coffee Grandpa had pilfered from a motel somewhere, boiled water in a sauce pan, and poured herself a cup, decaf, because she knew that once he’d be back there’d be more than enough caffeine for her nerves.

It had been eight months, but what’s long enough when it’s your own daughter who’s gone? Emma would have been ten, a year away from her mother’s fifth-grade class at school. Hard as it seemed to believe now, it was something they’d wondered about—whether Emma should be placed in her mother’s room. Now, even thinking about that seemed so professional, so wrong.

She opened her e-mail and found ads from Amazon and Macy’s, and a note from Aunt Lorraine, the crazy one, in Nevada, who said she’d come across something that made her think of her—of Abby, so she’d attached it, a PDF of a long letter written ages ago by someone Aunt Lorraine claimed was her own great-great-great grandma. “Please forgive me if I’m wrong,” Lorraine wrote. “It’s something the Lord laid on my heart to do. When you read it, you’ll know why.”

Sure, blame Him, Abby thought. I have. One single flick of the key and the note would be gone forever. She sat at the dining room table, looking out over the lake, her fingers curved over the keyboard, then took another sip of coffee, trying to decide whether, this morning once again, she really needed someone else’s blessed, well-meaning therapy. There was no cure.

“I never knew the right Reverend Bode was anywhere close to the Hinckley fire,” Aunt Lorraine wrote. “Maybe you’ve heard of it—the worst fire in Minnesota history.” And then, in blue, a URL she clicked on and scanned the story—hundreds dead in just a few hours, hundreds of square miles of pine forest burned in “a fire storm” that utterly destroyed several towns in pioneer Minnesota. 1894. September, 1894. Just a few days before school.

“Your great-great-great grandma wrote it,” Aunt Lorraine wrote, “and to think that her husband was actually there, the good Pastor Bode himself, just about floored me. But then, with what I know of him, I’m not surprised. You’ve got good blood in you—not all of it maybe, but a few pints.” And then this: “Sometimes she calls him ‘Uncle Cornie,’ but apparently everyone did back then. If you’d like, I can send you an obituary sometime—even the obit calls him that. He was much beloved. And your grandma was too—she got to be 100 years old—yikes!”

Abby had no idea who Aunt Lorraine was talking about, Aunt Lorraine, the whacko family historian, who’d left the fold farther than anyone else, her father’s side of the family, more than a century ago, five generations back.

Out front of the cottage, somewhere out on the bay, the loons wept so powerfully they could

have been sitting right there on the deck. It had been the loons that awakened both of them, sent Grandpa out in the boat and her to the kitchen for coffee. She'd come up to the lake, alone, and already that first night decided, on the basis of all that plaintive bawling, that somehow only the loons really knew.

She clicked open the attachment. The note was greasy and spotted and ripped in the corners. Someone, sometime, had read it—and often. The handwriting—stylish, mannered, as if the note itself was a resume—belonged to someone who'd learned cursive in the perfectly executed, school-marmish way. Still, the hand was cramped, the author old.

“There had never been much of a place in your grandpa’s life for sadness,” the note said—Abby had no idea to whom it was addressed and apparently neither did Aunt Lorraine. There was no date. *“From the day he gave himself to the Lord, his face was ever filled with joy. Maybe that was why he did not tell me what had happened back then. He said there had been a bad fire, a horrible fire, and many people had died and it was very sad. He had himself traveled up north to help organize a new church, and there was this huge, horrible big fire. That’s all I knew,”* she'd written. *“And then, years later, one Fourth of July, many, many years later, in Pease, he told me that story, slowly, as if it were happening once again before his eyes, in the darkness of the bedroom. I think it was the fireworks that brought it back. . . .”*

The fireworks had put him in mind of huge fireballs falling from the sky, carried along by what her great-great grandma called a cyclone. A cyclone?—sure. Abby read on. Fires there in the north woods were so common back then that no one that day had worried much about heavy smoke that made the air almost unbreathable. There'd been so little rain.

And then this: *“We were in the guest bedroom in the parsonage at Pease. Uncle Cornie had delivered the message that day, and there were games, and then fireworks. He told me because the story had returned with all of that flashing noise. Everywhere you looked, my husband said, there were ashes like heavy gray snow, smoldering stumps, and the charred bodies of men and woman and children, those who had not escaped. That was what he saw.”*

Emma died—freakishly, people said—in a car

accident on an outing with her friends. There'd been no fire.

“There were Hollanders there who had wanted a church. Uncle Cornie was there to build God’s church, to do His will. When the winds rose mightily, he said, he and others ran to a river, where they were saved, like others, by going into the water all the way up to their necks, as deep as they could go, he said. On the way they had spoken to a farmer, who told them he and his wife were going to stay because they had plenty of water. The next day both were dead because when it came, it was a mountain of fire before their scorching eyes. I read somewhere that if had I looked out my window that evening, all the way back in Kanawha, I could have seen it. But what did I know?”

Abby looked up from the screen. No one could have seen a forest fire from hundreds of miles away.

“Uncle Cornie saw people die. He wasn’t in town because those Hollanders didn’t live in Hinckley but in the country. But when that big fire marched to the river where they were, a man and his wife came stumbling up, he said; but in that thick smoke they couldn’t breathe and down they went, not far from the water. In a moment they were torches. Such things, my husband said, he’d never seen and no one should. Such things, he said, were visions of hell.”

“He said the fire came in waves, laughing and screaming so wildly they would pull their heads beneath the water to keep their hair from burning, to stay alive. It was an inferno that destroyed every living thing. He said simply to breathe was to burn your lungs. Later, he said, many of those who lived had horribly blistered skin, some half naked, their clothing burned from their bodies, but at least they were alive. Hundreds weren’t. Many, many people died.”

“For two hours, he told me, they stayed in that river and waited as giant waves of fire passed over them. He said he thought he would die. They all did. He was sure. He imagined glory. He said that in the midst of all that raging, he had trouble believing it wasn’t hell itself.”

“He said that when the inferno had finally laid waste to everything around them and still they found themselves alive, they crawled up on a river boulder, the burning woods all around them, the earth itself scorched and hot. They crawled up on the rock and out of the water—and suddenly it was cold, he said,

very, very cold, suddenly very cold. They huddled together and prayed. They huddled together and sang, too, sang the old hymns and psalms.”

It sounded like a movie, Abby thought, the doomed still aboard the *Titanic*.

“You had to know Uncle Cornie,” his wife wrote. “For him, every single car on the train was a new mission field the Lord laid open before him. He never turned down an opportunity to preach the gospel, so there in the river, with all that fire around him, he made up his mind that he couldn’t go back home just yet because that fire was a devil, a killer, and people had needs, spiritual needs. He knew others must have died like the couple who only reached the bank of the river that saved him and the others. He knew he had to stay. My husband was a minister of the gospel, and there was work to be done. All of this he told me late at night in the parsonage at Pease on the Fourth of July, just a year or so before he died.”

Abby clicked back to the website to check the numbers—hundreds were killed, over 400 in the town alone. It was, experts said, a fire storm people could see from Mason City, Iowa. The old grandma wasn’t wrong. She looked out the window toward the lake, tried to imagine every last tree aflame, plumes of fire from the crowns of all those hardwoods; and for a moment, she almost felt the heat herself.

“The town was gone, he told me, scorched stumps, houses, buildings gone, train tracks melted. The survivors were dazed, like walking dead. Those who were still alive buried hundreds of charred bodies in open graves, dozens at a time. He said he tried to speak to a frantic man who searched for his loved ones among the dead, one cramped body after another. Most all were unrecognizable. He never found his family. Another man, a man with his own spade, refused help when my husband asked. He dug a hole for his loved ones himself, in stubborn silence, then laid away his father, his mother, his sister and brother, a nephew and a niece—six bodies, his loved ones, all by himself. He wouldn’t hear of help. Can you imagine?”

A whirling spade flung dirt frantically from an open grave. He must have worked insanely, beyond his own strength. Abby told herself that she could imagine. Yes, she could.

“Uncle Cornie prayed at a funeral for sixty people who died, he and the other preachers—there

were more. Together, they tried to bring comfort in the name of our Father in Heaven, comfort where there had been, he said, so much of hell itself, so much darkness, so much sorrow. He wanted to remind them all that God was there, in their suffering, that he was beside them in their grief, with them in their suffering, and that he knew what loss was like because he too lost a child, a son. Uncle Cornie told me he tried to bring the comfort of the resurrection to so many people who were crying because so many were taken, so many were with the Lord.”

What could one say, really? Abby thought. If she were standing before a mass grave, what on earth could she say? She didn’t need the story of the fire to tell her she didn’t know what to say, wouldn’t have known—still didn’t. She clicked for the next page.

“Together, the survivors prayed and sang that morning, many of them still suffering from their wounds, their burns, still blinded by eyes that were scalded and scoured with ash and dust.

“All of that he told me, years ago. It was 1916, I think, and we were close to where that fire had raged. We were in Pease for the Fourth of July, the church where Uncle Cornie had pointed those homeless families toward, those families who had been living on land thick with ash from the Hinckley Fire. That fire had happened already 20 years before, but he’d never told me, never mentioned it. I’m sure I’ve forgotten some things now, but he had not because once he began to talk that night, late, he could not stop the memories he’d never before spoken of.”

Abby heard the boat come up, then listened as Grandpa killed the motor and the wash of waves floated him up toward the poles where he’d anchor it, down the hill at the lake.

“But there is more. In just a few days, he said, relief came in to that burned up world from all over, not just the Cities, but Michigan and New York, from Toronto and London, even—from all over. Men built relief houses for families who had lost everything. Railroads unloaded car after car overflowing with food and clothing and provisions. And everywhere, Uncle Cornie said, people helped each other. The Chippewa were there too, their teepees in the town. No one had even tried to count how many Indians died. But everyone helped each other.

“Uncle Cornie said he watched relief houses go up in a day with so many hands to help, to care for those

who were injured. Supplies were abundant—good provisions. Trains were filled with volunteers who tramped through the sticky ash to clean everything up. He said it was like nothing else he had ever seen, the way people helped each other. And then he stopped talking. There we were, in the dark, in the parsonage at Pease, and it was late, very late; and at that moment I heard my husband's tears. He had remembered all that death and suffering that night, but he also never forgotten all that kindness, all that love, all those helping hands starting over, and those tears emerged from such immense sadness and, too, such grateful joy."

Abby's tears had been countless, never really not there. And yet it was different now; lost as she was, she'd found herself in some ancient story told by a woman who died a half century before she'd herself been born, a story that woman knew only second hand. In the pocket of her hoodie she always kept a hankie.

"Only once before had I heard that sound and seen his tears," this old Grandma wrote, "only once. And right at that moment I understood very well why my husband didn't tell me any bit of that story twenty years before, when it had actually happened, because we had, just a few months before, buried our blessed Talia, our youngest, our daughter, just twelve years old, the only one of our children God chose to take as a child."

The image of her own blessed Emma flashed before her eyes, and her first searing thought was how cruel it was of Aunt Lorraine to send her this note, how thoughtless.

And yet it wasn't. It wasn't cruel. And there was more.

"My husband knew back then, in '94," her great-great-great Grandma wrote, "that I could no more hear that story than I could listen to anyone, so deep and dark was my grief over Talia. Those who tried—all of them—were like Job's friends. My husband loved me so greatly that he knew he couldn't tell me either his sadness or his horror or his great, great joy. And so we didn't speak."

All of that Abby understood. She knew.

"And now I want to say that you too will be delivered, just as was my husband and just as I was finally from my great grief—and his. God is good. His promises are sure. He is our only comfort in life and in death. This too you will come to see."

There was even another death, Abby thought, another child, another story. But then there always was, it seemed, another death, that is. After Emma, another child from school, seventh grade, hit on a bike. Always more—always, always more, and always, always grieving. And always, always more stories—this Tavia and this unnamed child, and Emma, this great-great-great-great grandchild, each of them in this vale of tears. So much to suffer. So much to say. And always this silent, absent presence all around because someone should be there—Emma should be there.

"Remember what he says," this old grandma wrote to someone never named, "'a bruised reed he will not break.' And the blessed words of the penitential prayer of David the King: 'A broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.'

"Hold to those promises. They will not fail, no matter what the storm or fire." And then signed, "Mrs. Cornelius Bode."

She needed to go to the cemetery, the place she'd been so often, maybe too often; but she needed to go one more time, one more time to tell Emma a story she'd never known.

Grandpa came in the side door, off the patio porch. "I came to get you," he said. "It's crazy out there—I can't even get bait on the line," he said. "Three walleye and four northern. We ain't going hungry, sweetheart."

She looked up at his eyes full of love.

"Once upon a time you loved it. I'll handle the crawlers, all right?" he said, "--just like when you were a girl."

"I been reading," she told him. "You ever hear anything about a great-grandpa named Uncle Cornie?"

"Preached at Kanawha for years—buried there, I think," her grandpa said. "I remember one time my grandma said he was a saint, so when I was a boy I always pictured him with a halo—big bearded guy with round German head, huge brush beard, and a halo." He pointed to the top of his own head.

"You think I should call Gregg, Grandpa?—ask him to come up too?"

He stopped for a moment, as if measuring the words, then smiled. "Listen, sweetheart, I know how to make myself scarce around here."

"You think?"

“Fish are biting, girl,” he told her. “I’ll be out on the lake forever. You’ll have the whole place to yourself.”

What made this Uncle Cornie cry, she knew, a man she’d never known, what made him bawl that night in somebody else’s parsonage was more than grief. It was joy too, seeing things heal, watching those trains empty all of that love.

“Ever hear of the Hinckley fire?” she asked him.

“I grew up in Minnesota—of course,” he said.

“This Uncle Cornie was there,” she told him. “Your great-grandpa.”

“Go on,” he said.

“It’s a long story,” she said, closing her laptop down. “It’s a story that’s meant to be told in a boat. It’s been years since I baited a hook—nightcrawlers or leeches?”

“You’re coming with?”

She looked up into his face, at his eyes, at

the halo around his bald head. “First, let me call Gregg,” she told him. “There are things we have to say.”

Rev. Cornelius Bode (1843-1917), a much-loved Christian Reformed Church preacher in the late 19th century, participated at a mass funeral held a few days after the Hinckley Fire, Hinckley, Minnesota, in September of 1894, when over sixty victims were buried in a mass grave. He had been to the region to organize a church. He and his wife, Hilke Ammerman Bode, lost their youngest child, Talea, in December of 1893.