

Wild Sage

Phyllis Barber

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This short story is based on an incident reported by Al Curtis of Logan, Utah, when he was approximately eighty years old.

"My father was on a mission in England. He was sick and there didn't seem to be anything that they could do for him. Mother said that we would have a special prayer one night so that he would be able to fulfill his mission. That very night the Three Nephites came to my room. It was as bright as day, and they told me what to do. They said if I would go up and gather wild sage and send it to him, and tell him to make a tea and drink it he would get well. I did that. I sent it to him . . . and he made the tea and drank it and was well again."

Curtis described the Three Nephites as being "all in white robes, clean shaven. They looked very similar to each other, like brothers. Their skin was rather dark. They talked to me and told me my mission was to be like theirs, and it has been true. I have never been on a mission but I have made converts everywhere I have went." Austin and Alta Fife, comps. Fife Mormon Collection, Vol. 1, No. 343; manuscript collection, Fife Folklore Archives, Utah State University Library, Logan.

I SIT HERE BY MY GATE, sniffing the stalk of sage in my hand, and wonder about the leaves drifting down on me. They float past my eyes and settle on my folded legs. Summer green, pale yellow, autumn orange, cracked brown. But there aren't any trees by my gate.

A few Lombardy poplars protect the house, but they're a quarter mile behind me. Nothing grows out here except sage. I look up to see if my memory has failed me, if maybe there's a tree I don't remember. Instead, I see some-

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thing moving, something white penetrating the scatter of leaves. It keeps shifting.

The smell of sage is the only familiarity here. My husband's away; Russell just ran off to a friend's; and I'm trying to make peace with the letter that came this afternoon, the one that said Jamie was getting weaker every day. Jamie. My son in Canada on a mission for the Lord. "He's wasting away," it said.

Jamie used to play in the hay rick with Russell, jumping six bales at a time. I can't imagine him having anything but butter cheeks and bull's energy. But that letter said there's no color in his face, that his bones are sticking up under his skin. It said the Lethbridge doctors had tried everything.

It's not right, son. You're out there, supposed to be baptizing for God. What's wrong? You aren't wasting away because of that girl, are you? You'd better be keeping your promise, Jamie. I kept mine. I didn't tell.

And more leaves drift onto my shoulders, covering my head, brushing my ears that are exposed because of the knot at the back of my head where my hair is tied up tight. I look up again to catch a glimpse of the white that is moving vaguely. The leaves fall thickly, impairing my sight.

When the letter came, I was rolling pie crust thin like a sheet of newspaper. The rural carrier usually finds a way to sidle around our kitchen and take his time letting us know if there's a package or a letter. But today, he must've smelled the sickness around the edges, because he didn't pull up a chair at the oak table or tease me into a piece of pie. He laid the letter on the table like it was a hot potato and hurried out the door. I dusted my hands on my apron towel and grabbed the envelope. I smelled something too.

Russell was shining mirrors on the toes of his Sunday shoes and laughing at his reflection — the chin man from the freak show. But he sensed something when I opened that letter. He stopped making faces into his spit-shine shoes.

"He's wasting away," I read out loud, "and there is nothing anybody can do. We've consulted doctors and prayed. He's too sick to put on a train for home."

My Jamie. Cheeks sinking into the jaw bones. Teeth poking out like a horseshoe stuck in his mouth.

"I better go get Dad," Russell said.

"Your father's too far away right now. Rode over to Cousin Lyman's to help with that caved-in roof. He won't be back until morning."

"He'd want to know."

"We'll have to handle this one, Russell. No time to ride for your Dad. You don't remember when you were born looking like an over-dyed yellow chick. Royal was off doing the Lord's work, speaking at a stake conference over in Duchesne County, and you came early, all colored with jaundice. God listened to me then."

The rolling pin sat solitary on the thin sheet of dough. Russell and I, my hands covering both sides of his head, his face close to my bosom, started talking to God. We talked fast. Jamie was thousands of miles away. There wasn't much time with a week-old postmark and a letter that said, "He's wasting

away.” That’s something I can’t imagine because Jamie can run into the side of a barn and literally bounce, fly through the air and land standing up, like a big cat or something. He hops fences and runs through dry gullies like they were graded road.

Russell and I didn’t squander time. “Lord,” we said, “please. Jamie’s good. This is a big mistake. You can’t let him waste away. He’s my son (“He’s my brother,” Russell said), and he’s leaking his life out. Help him, we pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.”

Russell put his shoe shine rags away, and I headed for my bedroom. I closed the door, straightened the two crooked drawers in the bureau, and knelt at the edge of my bed. Rubbing the coolness of the rose satin comforter with the pads of my fingers, I searched for my courage. I’ve avoided a little something with God, with my husband Royal, too. It’s about being a mother and maybe being foolish for my boy. But he’s a fine one, that Jamie, good as they come. I raised him and polished him like the toes on Russell’s Sunday shoes. Stroking the comforter, I sighed.

“Lord,” I said, but I couldn’t get my mind clear of Royal. Maybe I should’ve told him about his son. But he’d have filled with righteousness like a calf with frothy bloat and shouted the law’s the law. He’d have insisted that Jamie broke the law and must suffer the consequences. Royal would’ve kept his own son from his mission to Canada.

I’m sure I know my son’s insides. I’ve watched him with orphaned birds, teaching them to fly. Nursing baby calves all night with an old bottle and nipple. I’ve seen him.

I saw him acting like a calf around that girl, too. Those loops of dizzy curls around her face and neck. He liked to put his finger at the end of each strand and wrap the hair tight to her scalp. He’d kiss her then. Something about that hair kept Jamie tied to that girl. His eyesight changed when she was around. I kept telling him, “Jamie, other things first. Forget that brown hair.”

In the half-light of my bedroom, I laid my cheek against the comforter and let the cool soak into my face. That big bed. Me and Royal under those covers. Lots of years. “Trust not to thine own understanding,” Royal would say as he held me in his long arms while I’d try to analyze a problem. He’d pat my hair, my cheeks, tell me I was soft next to his body and fine as porcelain. “Let me and God take care of you,” he’d say. Fine china for Royal.

I know Royal has soft places. I’ve felt them. But he’s so stiff about life. Flesh clings to his bones like starch; he walks like his joints were made at a tinsmith’s. He carries himself like his name, like a king. He wants things precise, not like me, believing in the soft side of God.

My knees tingled, reminding me of my purpose for going to my room.

“Dear God, I know I’m just one of millions and zillions down here. I know there’s lots to do in your position, but, just one thing — I know Jamie’s worried about that girl, the one who tried to get a baby to keep him home. He said it only happened once, swore she guided his hands. I should’ve told Royal, probably the bishop too, but they don’t know Jamie like I do. Jamie and me, we’ve been preparing for this mission his whole life. He promised he’d

tear up her picture and spend every waking hour telling those Canadians what the restored gospel can do for them. He promised me about this, Lord.”

And I felt Royal in that room, almost like he was hiding under the comforter, like he was trying to sit up and tell me not to trust in my own understanding. I smoothed the depressions of my elbows out of the comforter, no Royal, and puffed the pillows high and fat.

And the leaves swirl around my face like a small duster. One clings to my eyebrow like an eye patch as if to remind me I could be blinded by my first born and think he’s a temple when he’s only a whited sepulchre. And then I see a hand reaching through the veil of leaves, an arm covered in white.

All day, I crimped the edges of pies and checked my bread for rising. I kept pulling that smell of new-baked bread way deep into me, wishing good things all around my self, like maybe the Lord was listening. Then I’d remember the day Jamie said goodbye. He patted his shirt pocket. I knew her picture was inside. “You promised,” I said.

“I’ll do it, don’t worry.” He picked up Royal’s best travel bag and settled it into the back of the buckboard. He smelled so good that day — like wild sage. We used to rub it on our hands when he was little and put our noses to our fingers. We’d rub it into our skin until we couldn’t see any trace of the sage except for the gray-green it left on our hands.

All day long, through the dishwashing and curtain starching, I never stopped reassuring God that Jamie is on the level and wants to do everything he can to spread the Gospel. He’ll spread it like angel hair over the people in Lethbridge so they can’t escape the truth.

“He said he’d repent so well he could look right into Your face,” I told God. “Like some of those Bible people couldn’t.”

And the leaves swirl, the myriad leaves and the intimations of white robes.

Russell came in from chores while the sun was dropping over the west fork.

“How are you feeling about things?” he asked me.

“I’m feeling strong as the smell of wild sage.”

But then he looked into my eyes. “You look tired.”

“I’m fine, Russell. Don’t you worry about me.”

“But I know your eyes.”

“What do you know?”

“Troubles.”

I wanted to pull my shawl around him and me and protect us from uneasy times. I wanted to spread my shawl out to Canada and Jamie. I’d walk across the plaid, find my way to his side. I’d tell him to square his shoulders and rise up from his bed. He’s a Mormon missionary.

“Baby child,” I said to Russell, “I want to believe, but sometimes I’m a foolish woman.”

“Don’t call me your baby child. I’m almost as tall as you.”

“I keep thinking you’re still small, about the size where I can pick you up, keep you in my arms where there isn’t anything to carry you away. Come here,

Russell. Hug me.” I reached out for my child who turned away, who kept just south of my fingertips.

“I’m going to get a breath.” Russell ran out of the house.

“Don’t you have a hug for your mother?” I called. He walked fast, moving his legs like he was racing with a train. Out the main gate, off down the road.

I followed him as far as the gate, and then I smelled that sage, right by the gate post, Jamie’s and my bush of sage ever since he was a little boy. That’s where we sat when we were talking about that girl. That’s when he told me he was surprised by the power of loving a woman. Now my Russell was running away from me, too. So I stopped.

I sank into the dust, Indian style. I rubbed the sage between my palms, slowly, and felt the stalk break into minced pieces and slivers. Then it bunched together like dead skin rolled off my neck and gradually disappeared into a powder that covered my palms. I flattened my hands on my face and sniffed, trying to fill myself with sage, that dusty smell of Jamie and me together out there by the road, that talk about being powerful instruments for God. We made a pact. We shook hands, rubbed the powder against each other’s palms, and we promised. As soon as this lie was over, we’d start again. Never, ever, would there be a breaking of this promise.

And that’s when the leaves started to fall. While I sat in the dust by my gate, sniffing wild sage, these colored leaves drifted down around me, and now they’re circling in the air though there’s no wind and everything’s still like after a snowstorm.

Suddenly, three men step through the veil of leaves and stand over me. I look up. They’re dressed in white robes. They look like they’ve just shaved, and they glow like the vibrating heat of a mirage, their skin darker than mine.

“Gather some sage,” one says. “Send it to your son and tell him to make tea. He’ll be all right.”

Their faces seem to float above the collars of their robes. Their eyes are like pale stars speeding across the sky. I can see lots of time in there, time that I don’t understand. Their eyes are full of pictures — planets, strange flowers, carved skins. Eyes like a mystery book, and I want to turn the pages myself, to read that book. And one of them has the leaves in his eyes. Every color from spring to autumn, changing as I look at him, and I want to ask how they change so fast, how there could be so many.

“Why did you come here?” I say instead.

“Because you love your son.” The colors swirled, changing from new green to autumn soft lavender and back.

“I did wrong, didn’t I?”

The eyes reel with winter snow and gray wind. They fill with the water and rocks of an Indian summer creek bed. Leaves drift onto the surface, their mirrored images darkening as they skim the stilled water.

He smiles. The leaves flutter up out of the man’s eyes, some tangling with his dark hair. And before I can say anything, the three men disappear, following after a circular staircase of leaves.

When I realize they are gone, I search for footprints, but I can't find anything like a bare foot-print, no rows of toes. I do find three leaves caught on the sage bush — green, lavender, and rust.

"They stood right by the gate," I tell Russell late that night when he creeps back home with the rising moon. "Sure as we're standing here in this kitchen. I brought back some sage."

And I rub the sage down to a rough texture and brush it into a white envelope. I watch that gray-green fall into the pocket of paper, and I make a little tent over my nose with my hands and sniff that sage as hard as I can.

Maybe Jamie did keep his promise, I think, tear up her picture and his feelings about that girl. Maybe he did put her out of his mind. Or maybe God can see Jamie's heart through my eyes.

Dear Jamie, I write, Here is some sage. Make some tea and drink every drop. Then you'll be well. Whatever is eating your insides out, making you cave in and waste away, this will cure all that. It'll be all right, son. You hear me, Jamie? Drink this tea. I love you.