

The Sweetness of Cherry Coke

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SOMETIMES INSTEAD OF WALKING the four blocks home after Sunday school I'd walk the block and a half downtown to the Millard County Courthouse in Fillmore, Utah, where my father worked as the county clerk. I loved the symmetrical purple brick building in the center of Fillmore's Main Street.

One Sunday in May I walked decisively to the courthouse because I had a problem only Dad could fix. No cars lined the street. No one was drinking from the water fountain in front, but I knew someone was inside, because my dad worked at the courthouse on Sunday. "It's the only time and place I can have peace and quiet to get something done," he'd grumble.

I walked up the cement steps, tugged the front door open, and stepped quickly inside as it clunked shut behind me. The cool, dark interior encapsulated me from the outside world. I'd never been to a temple but figured the Millard County Courthouse came as close as I'd ever get.

From the entry I looked full circle. Every door on the main floor was closed: Treasurer, Assessor, Recorder, Sheriff. As County Clerk my father worked in an upstairs office beside the judicial chambers. I stood still, listening for my dad, but could hear no sounds. It was dark after being outside in the sun.

For just a flash I thought of the jail in back and a shot of adrenalin propelled me toward the polished wood stairs that led to my father. My heart pounded as I tip-toed around the ornate tile seal of the state in the center of the floor. No one would see if I walked across it today but I didn't want to. Before climbing the stairs, I stopped again and listened.

This time I heard my dad whistling "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean" and caught a whiff of his Camel cigarettes. No need to fear. Nevertheless, I flew up the stairs knowing my father's eyes would shine when he saw me.

"How's my little sailor girl?" he said admiring my white dress with the navy blue collar.

Biting the corner of my lip trying not to cry I answered, "Not good." He sat down and pulled me on his knee.

Surrounding him on the counter and tables lay huge books with court

records written in my dad's distinctive penmanship—decisive—flowing with every letter aligned perfectly to the others. Today was a work day for my dad but I knew he'd have time to hear my story.

"Well you better tell me about it, Honey," he said. Honey was my nickname. He said it partly because it was the color of my hair and partly because I was so sweet.

I looked into his face, "Dad, I am never going to Sunday school again. Never."

"Never? That's a long time. Did something happen this morning at Sunday school?"

I hoped I could tell my dad without blubbering. My voice cracked as I began to explain, "Yes. The kids started sniffing me when I sat down and they all scooted down to the end of the bench. They whispered, but I could hear them say I don't smell like a Mormon. And Daddy I want to."

"You mean we're going to have to get a year's supply of beans, so you can smell like a Mormon," my dad chuckled.

"Dad." I jumped off his lap and stamped my foot. "This is serious." In my mind I could see Merlene and Sam holding their noses and sliding down the bench. I started to cry. "The kids laughed at me and no one wanted to sit by me because I smell inactive."

"Smell inactive?" My dad hugged me close, "Hell, you just smell like your old dad's smokes. We can fix that."

I stopped snivelling to say, "I think it is more than that. Surely they wouldn't act like that because of a little cigarette smoke. Would they?"

"Yep. I think they would. For you, and only you, maybe I could not smoke on Sunday mornings. That way you can smell active like everyone else at church. How'd that be?"

"Okay. But Dad I want to smell active and really be active. Understand."

"Sure do. If that is what you want that's what I want you to be: really active."

I smiled at my dad and gave him a tight hug. I liked having my dad work in the courthouse. To work there he'd had to be elected. For all our family, even Grandma Fannie, the election was scary. It came down to who had the most votes, the actives or the inactives. My father's opponent was a woman who had held the position for one term and was a stalwart in the church.

Wonder of wonders my father won. The inactives said it was because he was a well-liked, intelligent man. The actives said it was because he ran against a woman who should stay home with her children, since her husband had a good job on the road crew. Grandma Fannie said he won in spite of himself.

Everyone, even the inactives, supposed he would give up his cigarettes

when he became elected. For no one who smoked had ever held an office in the Millard County Courthouse, unless you counted some of the sheriffs who smoked when they went to the Beaver Cafe or up Copleys Canyon. But he didn't.

"I love you, Dad." I hugged him again, nestling my nose in his wavy hair. "And it's okay with me how you smell."

He took my hand and we stood at the windows in the east and looked down at Swallow's Confectionery across the street. "How'd you like to buy a Cherry Coke before you head home?" He didn't know actives aren't supposed to drink Cherry Coke and he wanted to make me happy, so I said, "Sure, Dad. I'd love it."