Dying Inside

The stained tablecloth and food smeared plates stared morosely at Sarah, defying her to ignore their stickiness. Cake crumbs littered every surface and a puddle of melted Camembert was inching its way over the edge of the benchtop on its way to a gooey kind of freedom on the floor below. There was nothing else left. As usual, Sarah had prepared almost all the food for the inter-staffroom morning tea the night before, even though she had playground duty that break and wouldn’t be there to partake of the goodies. She had hoped they had remembered to put a plate aside for her this time but, as usual, she had hoped in vain.

“Oh Sarah, that upside-down pineapple cake was amazing!” Jacquie enthused, the last lick of icing disappearing into her mouth off her finger. “You should do that again. The melting moments were a bit dry, not your usual standard, but they were okay”

The other two members of the English staffroom agreed, nodding absently as they sat back in their chairs. It seemed to Sarah that both were almost surgically attached to their phones, scrolling endlessly through their photos and feeds. Jay had his feet up on the edge of the staffroom coffee table, almost dislodging the pile of dirty plates, and Claire was obviously posing for selfies – her cheeks sucked in and her lips puckered. Sarah stood in the doorway, waiting for a word of thanks for her efforts. The silence stretched out, only punctuated every now and then by the muted tapping of fingers on keypads.

Inwardly sighing, Sarah wearily started gathering the detritus of the morning tea and placed it in the sink while running the hot water over it. Reaching under the sink, she remembered they were low on suds again. She had replaced it last time, and the time before that, surely it was someone else’s turn to bring in some dishwashing liquid? But then again, she was the only one who seemed to wash up the endless supply of coffee cups and spoons anyway. Turning to the others she was about to mention this when the first bell rang to start moving towards class.

“I’ve got my Year 12’s now for English. You’re all on a spare. So maybe …” Sarah didn’t get to finish the sentence.

“Never mind, you can finish those later”, Claire said airily, her wide opened blue eyes never leaving her screen.

As Sarah picked up her tray of playbooks to head to class, her staffroom colleagues began preparing for one of their gossip sessions about… well whatever it was they gossiped about. Sarah didn’t quite know, she had never really been invited to join in.

She loved her class, and she loved her job. Sarah relished the spark she felt when every now and then, that sudden light of understanding broke over the face of a child who had finally realised that they *knew* something, that they *could* do it! Today, however, after discussing last night’s homework, answering questions about the upcoming assignment, and the class settling in to fifteen minutes of silent reading to end the lesson, Sarah felt sad. She felt she was retreating more and more into herself every day and spending less and less time communicating with others. Not in the classroom, where her obvious passion for her subject inspired even the most reluctant student to try their best, but in her personal life.

As Sarah surveyed her class, every head bent over the class play, she tried not to think of how long it had been since she had had a meaningful relationship, where she felt she got back as much as she gave. Her work colleagues played upon her willingness to work, often asking her to help out with writing up their task sheets because they were just ‘so busy’. All her past boyfriends had taken her for granted, never appreciating all the things she did to try to make their life easier. They were drawn to the pretty young woman for her gentle manner and the way she helped them organise their chaotic lives, but after a while they left when they found someone more ‘exciting’. Even the few friends she had made in school and University had drifted away after a while, finding excuses with their work and young families not to catch up, and Sarah didn’t feel she could chase them and encroach on their multitude of other plans. She felt that she was dying on the inside a little bit more every day. An involuntary sigh escaped her lips, causing the student closest to look up. Sarah noticed Cameron looking at her and forced a smile.

“Miss, I know we’re supposed to be reading, but I have a question,” he stage whispered.

“It’s okay Cameron, our 15 minutes is practically up anyway. What’s your question?”

“Well, it’s this part in Act two scene two, where Caesar is talking to Calpurnia. I don’t really get what he means.”

Sarah felt a smile tug at the corners of her mouth. “I see. You might want to be a bit more specific about what part of that scene, Cameron. I’d be better able to help you if I know exactly which line is causing you grief.”

Cameron smiled sheepishly in return. “Sorry Miss. It’s where she is telling him not to go because she has dreamed about him dying, and he says

*‘Cowards die many times before their deaths; The valiant never taste of death but once. Of all the wonders that I yet have heard, It seems to me most strange that men should fear; Seeing that death, a necessary end, Will come when it will come’*.

I don’t think I really understand what he means. Is he saying that he doesn’t fear death? Isn’t that a bit arrogant, you know, seeing what’s going to happen to him?”

Sarah pondered for a few seconds, formulating her response carefully. “That’s a good question Cameron. Here’s what I think – Caesar isn’t saying he’s not scared. He’s explaining that there is no point spending your whole life imagining your death and fearing it, because it is inevitably going to happen one day. Instead, live for all the wonderful things in the here and now and forget about the death to come.”

“So…,” Cameron frowned uncertainly, “he’s saying that imagining your death, and focusing on the fear of dying, means you don’t live for today – you miss out on the now. In fact, you are dying a little bit every day because you are too scared to go out and live. He’s really telling Calpurnia that he will not spend his life locked away and miss out on being who he wants to be! Miss…? Miss Cage? Are you okay?”

Sarah had gone still, her eyes aglow with a dawning realisation as Cameron’s words washed over her and a memory flooded her mind. The memory of her mother shushing her as a child, huddled together on the back step of their house as her father banged around inside in yet another one of his alcohol- fuelled moods. Although he never laid a hand on her mother or herself, it was agreed between the two of them that it was safer and easier to wait it out till he calmed down, and scarier to try to stop him. Sarah remembered leaning against her mother, her small arm wrapped around her mother’s back, listening to the sounds of walls being bumped into and the smaller items of furniture being knocked over.

“Why don’t we ask daddy to stop drinking, mummy? He’s lovely when he hasn’t been to see his friends after work”

Her mother had sadly kissed the top of her head and said “Just remember, it’s sometimes better to say nothing. Some people don’t like to be challenged about how they act. If you challenge them, they won’t like it, and they won’t like you for it either. It’s better to be a peacekeeper. If daddy is happy then we can be happy too. He works so hard for his boss, he sometimes forgets we need him too. Listen…he’s quietened down now. Let’s just clean up in the lounge and then we’ll make your dad’s favourite cake while he has a little nap. We can all have a big piece after dinner!”

The rest of the class were now watching their teacher with a great deal of concern as she sat staring through them.

“Miss Cage? Are you sick? Should we get someone?”

Sarah didn’t answer. Her mind was awhirl remembering: the extra jobs she’d taken on for others at work to ease their stress, the endless errands she’d run for friends who always said they were too busy themselves, the social demands from boyfriends that she had simply caved in to rather than cause tension. Any type of anger she had so strenuously avoided causing. Everything she did was to keep the peace, to keep everyone else happy. She had been avoiding finding what made her happy. She had been a coward.

Sarah brought herself back to the present with a shake. “I’m sorry everyone. I’m not sick. I’ve just been afraid. I’ve been like Calpurnia, frightened to really live, frightened to speak up for myself in case being myself wasn’t what made everyone else happy. It’s time I was Caesar – time to stop hiding and be brave, and be myself. I won’t die a little every day anymore – I will live every day instead!” To the amazement of the class, their usually calm and gentle teacher leapt to her feet, swept them an elaborate bow and left the classroom – five minutes before the bell was scheduled to ring.

Sarah returned to the staffroom and swept through the door, startling the other staff members. She opened her desk drawer and retrieved her handbag, then turned to survey the room. The dishes lay in the sink in cold water, globs of oily cheese floating on the surface like inflatable rafts at sea. No one had bothered to do anything to tidy up. Eying each person in turn Sarah made her announcement in a calm, clear voice. “I’m off to the shops to get a decent coffee. Happy to grab one for anyone else who wants one, but … when I get back, this mess will be gone. You made it, so you can fix it. There’s plenty of hot water. How about you wash Claire, and Jay, you can wipe.”

“Oh but Sarah, I was wondering if you could do my playground duty for me? I’ve got a headache after all this marking,” Jacquie whined. Sarah looked pointedly at the obviously untouched folder, lying forgotten under the half empty coffee mugs and discarded chocolate wrappers.

“Probably because you’ve spent the last hour actually staring at your phone. A bit of fresh air is probably exactly what you need then. Off you go.”

“Are you alright Sarah? This isn’t like you at all” Jay puzzled, a frown creasing his forehead as their normally diminutive colleague seemed to have grown in stature before his eyes.

“But it is like me – the real me I’ve been hiding so long. I’ve said nothing about your selfishness and the way you just take advantage of my good nature because I was afraid if I did, I’d cause tension. Whether you like the real me who tells the truth or not, I’ve realised that you being annoyed or angry won’t kill me. I am Caesar, and I refuse to die before my time has come!”

Sarah left her baffled staff with her head held high and a new confidence in her step. She would not worry that she might die today, or indeed any time soon. Today, after all these years, she was going to learn how to really live.