

Hushed-Voice Condolences

by Sandy Simpson

It's funny how we grow up and become our mothers. I grew up thinking that my mom and I were a whole lot different, but by the time mom joined the Angels in Heaven, I knew we were a whole lot alike. My mom and I? - were a whole lot alike.

We had both loved the same men throughout our lives. We loved my brother, with his odd humor, quirky dance moves and loyal ways....

We'd both loved my dad, with his outward grumpy scowl and inward teddy bear heart. And we had both loved Bob. Bob - was my husband of 40 years, and the man my mom had always called her "other" son. He was the man who had single handedly moved them across the country when dad got cancer. The man who had telephoned her on each of our wedding anniversaries to tell her how much he loved me. The man who would sit in the kitchen and humor her for hours while she prepared his favorite meals.

We were both hurt when Bob betrayed me. It shocked us both when he brought a 36-year old woman - my daughter's age - into our bed while I traveled, working as a part-time consultant to pay for his hobbies in retirement. We were both disappointed to learn that Bob had broken every promise he'd ever made, tossing me aside - in my middle age.

After he had left, I'd picked up my entire life and moved across country to be with my mom to take care of her. I bought a home, moved

her in with me, and several times a day for so many days, she'd try to get her head around what had happened to her daughter and what she felt like had happened to her. Sometimes, I would comfort her but often, I'd just let her to go on - pretending with her that her heart was broken in as many pieces as mine. It seemed plausible since I'd never told her the whole story. I couldn't bring myself to tell the worst parts. Like how he'd denied nothing when I confronted him, and said he'd been trying to have an affair for five years, before turning his back and walking out of the door. She didn't know how I collapsed onto the cold floor, crying and weeping and never knowing if I'd ever get up; or how when I finally did pick myself up, my whole body still ached with brokenness.

While mom didn't know all the details of my recent trauma, she was no stranger to the betrayal of men. As a child, her own father would leave for days at a time while she, and her middle-aged mom, and seven siblings would split the few potatoes and eggs left in the cold damp house, before going to bed still hungry. This family history haunted her as she approached middle-age, causing her to pick my dad apart and interrogate every exchange he had with other women, even when they were platonic⁷ and innocent. It's funny... the world could see that dad only had eyes for mom. But mom? Mom couldn't seem to forget how her dad would leave ... and so believed that dad would leave, because in her mind she believed ... that all men leave.

And so it was, that Bob's leaving me became mom's thing to whisper about to others. She never described the pain, disappointment or

bewilderment. Never told anyone that I spent sleepless nights wondering what I had done wrong, and what I could have done differently. She never told them about how the pain of it all had caused me to double over with stomach cramps to the point of nearly losing my breath. Perhaps because she didn't know how much loss his leaving had caused me.... Perhaps because even I didn't know ... or couldn't bring myself to admit this to myself.

Instead, she'd tell anyone who would listen how she had seen it coming. Yeah, she had the story down pat. She'd tell her captive audiences how Bob was this and that, and this and that, and how easy it had been to see it coming ... because after all, let's face it, all men leave their middle-aged wives. It was difficult to observe the pity on those little lady's faces when she'd stop mid-story as I'd walk into a room. And even more awkward when one of her lady friends would approach me with a tiny, hushed-voice condolence, saying, "It happened to me too. My husband left me for a younger woman too." Eyes darting around the room, clutching their sweaters to their chests, they'd whisper of their own betrayals, and before I could utter a single word, they'd hang their pretty heads, and hurry away...

Since mom got her wings and flew home to be with God, I've often wondered ... did she know something I didn't know? Should I have known that Bob would leave? Is it natural for this to still hurt this deeply.... this often ...and... this much ...?

Occasionally, ancestral voices whisper that all men do leave, and at these times, the pain and the shame of loss and loneliness still make me double over in pain. Some days, when I remember how ugly and disposable and "thrown away" I felt, I hang my head, praying to melt away in a crowd and re-emerge ... prettier younger. Those days are beginning to fade, however, and most days, I feel strong in my journey. These days, I'm starting to raise my pretty, middle-aged head to walk vibrantly and powerfully... practicing resilience ... and knowing ... there is no shame in the story of one man choosing ... to leave.