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The Prodigal Son as a smell picture

Day after day, the door is open and the night air comes in. Before my master allows himself any rest, he stands at the door to our house. Then I draw the outside air in through my nostrils searching for some hint of what he looks for, strains with his ears to hear. But there is only ever the smell of the hot ground, the scent of olive trees and the spreading fig. There is the scent of the warm winds and the slight sharpness of night air. Sometimes I smell the sweat scent of his son coming in from the fields after long labour. He brings with him the smell of outdoors, of vegetation and material soaked in human odour. I smell on him the scent of duty and toil as he tries to make up for an old man's sorrow and sense of regret.

Yet one day, something is different in the air. There is a smell coming downwind of something familiar yet unfamiliar. I know what part of it is: a smell of uncleanness, of animals, the pigs we may not touch or come into contact with. Yet this unclean smell comes closer and closer. I want to warn my master that something bad is coming closer, coming perhaps even into the house, an animal perhaps, some beast escaped. Yet there is something else mingled in with the smell, some scent that is familiar, half remembered, something that was once lost, but which yet lingers in the corners of the house and on the piece of cloth my master carries with him like a talisman.

My master is at the door. He is filled with joy. How can this be when the smell of foulness and animal is now so overwhelming? There is the smell of husks and swill, of rotting cloth, of sinks and degradation. It is the smell of death, as if the charnel house has taken hold of our dwelling. How on earth can my master fold this stench to himself as he is doing now, and yet he does, holding it and embracing it so that all these smells become mingled with his own.

He calls for water and towels and slowly the bad smells are washed away. There are perfumes and oils, as if for some great celebration. There is the wonderful smell of clean linen. After a while the smell of food rises, there is a great feast, with the smell of a fatted calf freshly cooked, the wonderful smell of fresh baked bread and the scent of wine poured out. Something has been made right, some marvellous occasion is at hand. I breathe it deeply. All the bad smells are gone. The house is full of the smell of food and joy, some great completeness is at hand. I think it must be the smell of heaven.