

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/4

Trudy Carpenter

The Truth about Who Buried Jesus

MARGARET MARY IS FIVE YEARS OLD when she first shoots to kill.

She waits in the dark for a very long time, sitting up in her bed and biting her lip so she won't fall asleep. She tries not to think because Jesus knows all your thoughts. When the dishwasher stops, she tiptoes downstairs to the dark family room in her pink princess pajamas. Light from the TV dances on the wall, and a broccoli smell hangs in the air. Margaret hates broccoli, can't swallow it, not even if she pretends she's a dinosaur eating a tree.

Her mother's crying in front of a black and white movie where a man and a woman are kissing. Margaret Mary hates kissing grown ups because they have prickly raspberry lips. She straddles her legs far apart like she's seen in a Western, raises the pistol, aims at the side of the head, and stops her breath so her hand won't shake. After the shot, Margaret drops the gun to her side. Now she can breathe.

Her mother still stares at the screen and sucks her cigarette. Yellow clouds puff to the ceiling. She wipes her eyes with a balled tissue and takes another sip from her glass. She doesn't notice the bright blood soaking into the cushions, doesn't know that she's dying.

Margaret shuts her bedroom door. She slides the warm gun into the holster under her bed and jerks the blanket up to her chin. She shivers because now she will go straight to hell with the bad people. She's not sure if the devil will come get her tonight or if she has to die first, but she hides Raggedy Ann under her pajama shirt and watches the door knob until her eyes itch and she can't keep them open.

The next time Margaret shoots, she's six and a half, and she's learned a few things. She knows that people can say words and not mean them. And no one can hear what she thinks, not even her mother. Her mother says Jesus can, but that's not true. If he could, he would not have to hear prayers said out loud.

Braver than when she was five, she pads to the kitchen in daylight. She watches her mother peel potato skins into long curls that drop dead in the sink. Margaret takes a deep breath and shoots through the back to the heart. She knows where the heart is because of the picture of Jesus hanging over her mother's bed. He's staring up into heaven, not into the room. His hair is gold and his heart is red and on fire. That fire is good, but the fire in hell is bad and burns off your skin like a cigarette does.

Some Friday nights, Margaret waits on the hard pew while her mother confesses her sins to the priest. Kids don't have to go in. Jesus washes her mother's sins away so she can go straight to heaven, just like Margaret washes her hands so she can eat supper. Jesus gets to forgive because he suffered. Margaret suffers, but she can't forgive. Jesus suffers little children so maybe he hates kids. If he does, Margaret hates him right back. She can't say that out loud, though, because Jesus would hear her and she'd go straight to hell.

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When her mother stays home in her nightgown, she kneels by her bed and begs forgiveness from the picture of Jesus while Margaret dresses herself. Then her mother stops crying and makes scrambled eggs with red jelly. Those days she braids Margaret's hair before she sends her to school.

This time there's even more blood with the death and it floods the kitchen like the bathtub runs over when Margaret splashes too hard. She thinks about cleaning it up, but the killers on TV just run away from their messes. They're going straight to hell so they just don't care. Still, she wipes the soles of her shoes with paper towels so she won't track up the living room carpet.

In her mother's room, she kneels on the cold wooden floor, hands folded, and whispers up at the picture, "I'm sorry." She knows she'll do it again, but Jesus doesn't stop people or hear what they think.

By the time she's seven, Margaret's learned new ways to kill from watching TV—some fast and some slow. Fast death could be a car crash into a tree, a long kitchen knife sliced through the neck, maybe a rope tied to the banister or a shove down the basement stairs onto concrete.

Jesus died on the cross and it took three days, which is a very long time. Will her mother die fast or slow? She won't be able to crawl to the picture if she dies really fast. Jesus would not have time to forgive her again and she'd go straight to hell.

But sometimes on TV people aren't really dead. They sit up at the end of the show and make everyone scream, so Margaret knows that she needs to do more or she'll never be able to sleep. She'll zip her mother into the red flowered dress with the shiny green belt, the one she wears to confession. Jesus likes to see dead people in their best clothes. Margaret needs the casket lid firmly shut and the box deep under ground before she feels safe.

While her mother drives to the grocery, Margaret sneaks again into the small bedroom where she's never welcome. She wraps a clean towel around the picture. It's hard to kick the long shovel into the ground wearing flip-flops, but she's very determined. She lowers the picture, then fills the dark hole with hard chunks of dirt and smothers the bare spot with leaves.

When her mother gets home and demands, "Where's Jesus?" Margaret will answer, "He died for your sins." She'll say it real loud so that Jesus can hear.