

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

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### BELIEFS OF MY MOTHER

Abigail couldn't help herself. Every time she looked up from the television, there it was—the dreaded picture gallery on her apartment wall. Why couldn't the staff have put up the pictures someplace else? That way she wouldn't have to look at them every time a commercial came on. Lately it had become like a cemetery filled with the grave markers of strangers. She had begged the attendants to take down the portraits of people she no longer remembered. But they always insisted that the pictures should remain in hopes that they might trigger her memory. Fat chance. She had looked at them hundreds of times to no avail. They were just empty faces—and real dog-faces, some of them. How could any of her relatives or friends be that ugly?

But there was one picture that she did remember. It was a close up of a stout middle-aged woman surrounded by the multi-colored flowers of her garden. The woman's face, though much darker than hers, reminded her of the image she saw each day in the mirror. From the wall her mother smiled back at Abigail across the years, reassuring her that at least some things are forever.

Sometimes Abigail would talk to her mom on the wall. *There you are again, Ma—out in your garden. You do love your flowers. Would you pick a bouquet for me? Maybe some zinnias, delphiniums, and dahlias, and don't forget the sweet williams.* And she could imagine her mother's reply. *Well, get off your fat ass, child, and help me pick some!*

Flowers were the one thing about her mother—that and her no non-sense attitude—that Abigail could still remember. But she wished that she remembered other things.

Like what made her mother tick? Abigail knew that her mother loved her, in her tough gentle way. But what did she believe? Was she a Democrat or a Republican, for instance? Abigail thought about that for a while. She couldn't even remember which party she belonged to herself. It would be nice to know that much at least when all those annoying television ads came on, with their babbling heads telling her to vote for them. She didn't give a rat's patootie about any of them.

As another politician appeared on her TV screen, she pointed the remote at the man's smiling face and made him disappear. *Go away!* she shouted. Flipping the channels till she was safely past him, she paused at a show she had often watched with fascination. Here was the same man again in a nice blue suit with a pink carnation in his lapel. He was always shouting about God or crying. This time, he was doing both. And as usual, he was asking for money. People in the audience were cheering and yelling, *I believe! I believe!* The show was on Sundays, because it was always announced with the words "Sunday Morning Worship with the Reverend Thomas B. Fairweather." Was there something special about Sundays that made people believe? All days seemed the same to her.

Did her mother ever watch this show? she wondered. And did she believe in the same God? Abigail struggled to remember any time she had seen her mother watch it. Maybe her God was on a different channel.

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Abigail thought about all the other things besides God that people believe in. She remembered a show she had watched yesterday—or was it last year?—on the *History Channel*. It was about the American Revolution. There were a bunch of white guys in funny wigs standing around a table. She didn't remember much of the plot, but the words "all men are created equal" stuck in her head. She thought of her mother. Did she really believe that, she wondered—that black folks were just as good as white folks? And what about women? Abigail's mind raced. She grew slightly dizzy as she always did when too many things popped into her head at once. Did she believe all that stuff that scientists say about people being related to chimpanzees and how in that show on the *Discovery Channel* everything started with a Big Bang?

But she especially wanted to know if her mother believed in God. And if so, which God? She stared at her mother's smiling face, looking for answers. *I know you're in there, Ma. Help me out.*

There's nothing in a person's face, Abigail thought, that tells whether a person believes in God, or even if they're a Democrat or a Republican. For all she knew, her mother could have believed in a God like that Hindu elephant deity she had seen on some travel channel—Ganesha or something like that. It was supposed to ride on a mouse and was considered to be the Lord of success. She looked at the dirty old dress her mother wore in the picture. Her mother didn't look very successful, but maybe it was because she didn't pray enough to her elephant God. How exactly are you supposed to pray to an elephant? she wondered. And that poor mouse.

Abigail turned off the TV and stared at the blank screen, trying to recall anything that her mother had ever said or done that had to do with God. But nothing came. She sat back in her rocking chair and gazed at the ceiling. Yes, now she remembered something. It was some kind of solemn occasion. There were flowers everywhere, and her mother was sitting right next to her. This time, she wasn't smiling. There were also a lot of other people all dressed up in black outfits sitting in a dim room. They were looking at a body lying in a long wooden box on a bed of white cushions. Caked with makeup, the dead man's face was as unfamiliar as all the other faces on her wall. Yet there was something about it. Now she remembered. It was the face in the picture next to her mother's. The people in the room were all staring at him, as if waiting for something. They all looked sad and hungry. Then the scene shifted. She was in the kitchen of some house, and the same people were now drinking red wine and eating things from a big table as they made jokes to each other. She saw her mother putting slabs of pink stuff from the table onto her plate and eating them. And for some reason words she had once heard popped into her head: *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood*. She shuddered at the thoughts that crowded her mind. What happened to the dead man? Exactly what were they eating? And was that really wine in their glasses or something else? Could her mother have believed in eating people when they died? She shook her head and rocked violently in her chair, moaning softly.

Another scene flashed in her head. This time, she was inside a big white building filled with pews. Pews! Now we're getting somewhere, she thought. What kind of building besides a church has pews? Every row was packed with people dressed up in their Sunday best. Up in front

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was the silver-haired minister, who was holding a microphone and *singing* along with a five-man blues band and three women backup singers. Everyone was singing joyously, while some even danced in the aisles. And there was her own mother, dancing up a storm like some witchy woman. *Go, Ma, go!* Abigail shouted. *Hallelujah!* Then she got up from her chair and danced and shouted till she collapsed on the floor, laughing so hard she peed in her pants.

Abigail cleaned herself off—at least there's one thing she could still manage—and went back to her chair. Still out of breath and laughing, she clutched her heart. Oh my, Abigail. You're not a young girl anymore. And she recalled a time long ago when she was ten, or maybe eleven, marching with her mother in some kind of parade. Only it wasn't the kind of parade where people clap and cheer. Those marching were carrying signs and banners, though she couldn't read or remember what they said. She clung tightly to her mother's hand and to the small sign she carried. People were shouting things—mean, awful things—and there were police holding back vicious dogs. Her mother squeezed her hand, trying to reassure her. There was a grim look on her face, like she was marching into battle with Satan himself. Abigail could see the fear in her eyes. She trembled as she heard once again the sound of the dogs barking and people screaming.

It was a while before Abigail stopped shaking. It was a memory she wished she could erase. She saw her mother, her head bleeding, lying still in the street. *Ma, get up! Please, Ma, don't leave me!* When her mother opened her eyes and slowly rose to her feet, Abigail couldn't stop crying. *It's OK, child,* she said, wiping her dress off and putting her hat back on. *We did it!*

Exactly what she and her mother did that day she could not remember. But Abigail knew it was important—important enough to die for—which had to mean her mother believed in something. But what if her mother didn't believe in God? Just because she danced in Church doesn't prove anything. And if she didn't believe, would that make her a bad person?

Abigail muttered the word softly to herself—*God God God God God God*—gradually increasing the speed of her mantra. Then she shouted it as loud as she could: *God! God! God!* She waited for an echo inside her. She knew what the word meant, and the fact that she was now thinking about God must mean something, but for her it had no connection. Did that mean she didn't believe in God herself, or had she just forgotten how to believe?

She grew tired of thinking about God. She tried thinking about her mother some more. Come on, Abigail, think. Don't give up. Troll your soul. She laughed at the rhyme she had made. She still knew what a soul was, or at least thought she did. It is something inside you that isn't really part of your body, and it has to do with God and heaven and hell. But what did it mean to troll? Wasn't a troll some kind of scary creature? She remembered reading as a child a story that had big hairy trolls in it. What did trolls have to do with anything?

She searched her room, looking for clues. The man in the blue suit was always clutching his Bible and quoting verses from it. Yet there were no Bibles anywhere. There were no books at all, in fact, for she had stopped

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reading years ago. Once, she had opened a book down in the lobby while waiting for breakfast. It was some novel that everyone was talking about. All she could see were lines of little black marks running across the pages. Disgusted, she slammed the book shut. But there was a time when she did have books. It was in that other place where she had lived. It was a big yellow house, not this little room. There were books there—all kinds of books—stacked everywhere, even in the garage. But then they all got wet, she remembered, and someone—who was it?—had thrown them all away just because they had gotten all musty. But isn't that the way books are supposed to smell? The memory made her angry. While she couldn't recall any books she had read, she had always felt better having them around. She used to stroke their spines on the shelves, promising herself to read them someday. And then that same person—it was a woman, she now remembered—had bought her a big screen TV, as if that somehow made up for throwing out her books.

Someone knocked at the door. Grumbling, she got up to answer.

*Hi, Mom. Are you having a good day?* It was that same woman again—the one who's always calling her Mom and trying to hug her. Oh no, she's going to do it again—ugh!

*OK, Mom, be that way.* The middle-aged woman seemed offended, though why Abigail couldn't imagine. That's what you get what when you go around hugging strange women. I'm not her Mom. Why can't she accept that? *I'm here to count out your pills. Then I have to run. I've got a big meeting downtown.*

Yes, she always had big meetings. Abigail stared at her quietly as the woman counted the pills. *You sure do have a lot of pills, Mom. Looks like you've got some new ones here. I may have to start charging you overtime.* She laughed nervously.

Why did the woman always have to make small talk? Just get on with it. Abigail fidgeted her fingers, waiting for her to finish and get out. Then she remembered who the woman was. It was the same woman who had thrown out her books! How dare she come back here?

*Get out!* cried Abigail. *Leave me alone!*

*Oh, Mom, not again. I thought you remembered.* Then the woman began to sob.

Abigail began to cry, too. She put her arms around the woman. *There, there, dear—it's all right, I forgive you. And maybe someday you'll find your real mother. And don't forget to close the door on your way out.*

Breathing a sigh of relief, Abigail trudged back to her chair and turned the TV back on. Maybe she should look there instead of in her mind. She stared blankly at a commercial which showed a big green lizard walking in the desert when suddenly a piano fell out of the sky behind him. Is there some meaning in this? she thought. Who is this lizard and what does he want? She shook her head. This is all so complicated. There must be some truth here.

She thought back to all the programs and commercials she had seen on TV, at least those she still could recall. Then she remembered a man's

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face—a very wise face—and some words that always made her feel good. *And that's the way it is.* The way he said it just sounded so right. That's what her mother always said whenever he came on. *Now there's a man you can trust, Abigail—a man you can believe in.* But where was the man now? Abigail couldn't remember seeing him lately. She wished he would come on right now and say it again. *And that's the way it is.*

Abigail turned off the TV and sat back in her chair, smiling. She didn't want anything to interrupt the memory of that face or voice. It was something to believe in.