

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

Elizabeth Brown

Mother Ruth

The clock chimes two o'clock in Gunther Law Firm. The attorneys are fifteen minutes late. Ruth stands to stretch and succumbs to a strange sensation of general malaise. She attributes her weakness to motherhood, a natural occurrence, a physical transformation, she suspects, associated with a sacrifice, the giving of new life and subsequent decline, the shedding of self, of ego, of flesh and atoms.

She adjusts herself, brushing the specs of dandruff off her wool blazer, glancing down at her new Gucci shoes—torture devices women have agreed to wear, God knows why, but she's one of them, resignedly, and so here she is on the fifth floor of Gunther Law Firm, dressed and punctual, smartly wrapped like a gilded gift to the gods. Tim insists it's for her wellbeing, for her sanity, and she'll be a better mother for Hazel, but she thinks otherwise. She'd told him all this, how she never really approved of lawyers, and, at some point, she even began to loathe attorneys who she'd decided propagate mistrust, warring, bitterness, a litigious society. He'd called her extreme, blamed postpartum, hormones, reminded her of the plan, how he'd stay home and finish his PhD and she'd practice law, what she'd wanted all along. *You said it yourself, Mother Ruth. You'd lose your mind staying home with a baby.*

That was before she passed the bar, and before Hazel.

I was never good with the argument, she thinks now, lips pursed and chapped, tongue tied, sallow skinned, waiting with swollen feet and resentment, waiting for the barbaric interrogation to commence. *They'll chew me up and spit me out.* After five then ten then fifteen minutes past, after breathing the stale air, and after all the suffering, it sinks her into her, a deep malaise settling in like a bloodletting. *No, I won't let them. they won't have it.* She holds her breath, refusing to partake, and then she hears ping on her phone, and imagines it's Tim, salivating, eager for news. Stubborn Tim, if only he understood the gravity, if he could see her now, how she's changed even upon entering the building. How it happened, she can't say, but she felt it immediately, the altering, the diminishing, as if she were turning to dust inside these walls. *No, it's wrong, all wrong. I can't,* she decides, and does an about face in the direction of the exit, quickly, brashly, new skinned.

"Ms. Moore?"

"Tim?" she asks. *No...why would Tim be here?*

"I apologize. We're running late. Did you need to use the rest room before we start?"

"Rest room?" she repeats. "Oh, no." And she gets her bearings and goes to him, hand extended, smiling and squinting from his sheen, reaching for him, eagerly, as if he were a graven, golden image, a thing to touch and worship.

John, he says, call me John.

Forgive these iniquities.

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"Come this way," John says.

She follows John down a narrow corridor, and he sneezes a few times, blames it on his daughter, Liza, home sick with the flu, and maybe he's getting it, and the light dims, and a scent wafts, a revolting scent, a dusky, pagan scent not of this world, emanating from him. He's off center, marred, she decides, imagining his lips on a chalice, drinking blood in the cellar of the Masonic Temple in town, while his wife reads their daughter a bedtime story, tucks her in, burying her face in the crook of her neck, basking in damp hair and Strawberry Smoothie shampoo, something deliciously safe, so unlike her husband's vulgarity, an odor she can't decipher.

So are there houses full of deceit.

John sneezes once more before opening the solid wood door to reveal a conference room and the interrogators clustered around an oval table, encompassed by a dark sheen of ebony and iniquities. *They are waxen fat, they shine.*

And next a barrage of hands: one sweaty; one fleshy; one scaly. It's wrong, all wrong. Doesn't Tim always have the last word. He's gentle but boorish and manic and turns on a dime. *Timothy was a hellion, abominable,* his own mother liked to say. *Little Tim...he did it...he gave me this grey hair.* He hates to be called, Timothy. His mother reserves it for special occasions: *Timothy, your father passed.* Ruth calls him Tim, can't bear to tell him she prefers Timothy, the agonizing truth of it, how Timothy sits on the tip of her tongue waiting to erupt, seismic and ever-present. After the baby, she preferred the sweet smell of Hazel, and felt a pinch of guilt so she got to calling him Tim-Tim-Timothy in lyrical fashion, to break the spell, to jar him back, but he'd roll his eyes and sulk. Then, out of nowhere, he emerged from his melancholy, frenetic, ebullient, wide-eyed, and called her Mother Ruth: *Where are the diapers, Mother Ruth? I made us dinner, Mother Ruth! Come along, Mother Ruth!*

"So, Ms. Moore...Of all the law firms, why Gunther. Tell me...why?"

Santy Clause, why? Why are you taking our Christmas tree? Why? Ruth wakes to adulthood, as if out of a trance, to tight Gucci shoes and swollen feet and three strangers, curious, perplexed, one beady eyed, one baggy-eyed, one thick browed, all three glaring, furtively, monstrosly: one long, one wide, one regular. *Rub-a-dub-dub, three dolts in a tub.*

"Do you need us to repeat the question, Ms. Moore?" The long one is talking. He has long, pale, shaky hands like Ichabod Crane. He hesitates when he speaks. He touches his paper, nervously, as if it were cooling down, touches it on and off, as if it might disintegrate at any moment, touches it with the tips of his slender finger like one might a piece of cloth to be stitched. Right here in Gunther Law Firm, a wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land.

She answers their questions and in a voice distantly foreign. Now the clock chimes three times, and Hazel is waking from her nap, flushed and fresh and smelling like bread taken from the oven. *You have to go, Mother Ruth. You'll go berserk at home. Do it for us, for the family.* He's mistaken, poor Tim, lost lamb, envisioning a scenario for her, one that's prestigious, lucrative, exulted, so much more than the banes of motherhood, so he

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thinks. He's blind, can't see the divine, the miracle; he has ears but cannot hear and eyes but cannot see; he sees the tree for the tree and the mountain for the mountain and nothing more and nothing less.

The regular man is talking now; he's average by all measures: medium height and frame, medium brown hair, and even his fingers are of medium length; he's sketching on a piece of paper to illustrate his point, biting his bottom lip. *The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron, and with the point of a diamond.*

Ten minutes later, Hazel is red-faced, rejecting the bottle, kicking off her soft woolen blanket and knitted booties. *She's a fighter like father*, Grandma Moore likes to say. Ruth's blouse dampens at the image. *I have to go* repeats and distracts, and she struggles to discern his words, the wide one going on about clerking days, how he flunked the bar exam. He's a garrulous goon in an Armani suit, lips sputtering, wide-eyed, he spits out words, shifts, and spits some more. *Gluttony*. He adores himself, desires himself, lusts after himself. "I was a horrible student... abominable," and he drums his fat fingers on the wood, and pauses and asks, "Where do you see yourself in five years, Ruth?"

"Five years?" She thinks of Hazel starting kindergarten, how she'll volunteer as a room mother, run for PTO president. "I'm not sure," she says. The air stills, her words hang, leaden. "I think I should go," she adds, and the lawyers gaze back, melting, morphing into one head, one hideous grin.

"Pardon?" The wide one asks, hungry, eager, incensed, as if he might slide across the ebony wood and bite her.

"It's just not going to work for me...that's all."

"What do you mean?" the long one says. She hears the murmuring, the wide one blow out air like the swish of a sword drawn from its sheath, a clean maneuver, stirring her fluids, quickening the rush, disrupting the easy metronomic pulse.

Go now before it's too late. She stands and pushes in her chair, head downcast, imagines the lawyers' heads spinning, shoulders shrugging, beads of sweat and flakes of flesh flying, the fall of Sodom. She averts her gaze, until she gets to the door, and then looks back to witness the turning from stony gazed and slack-jawed to irascible.

She stops cold as if their will prevents her. *Can these bones live?* she prays, and the breath enters, shaking bones, bone to bone, a gathering of bones, a coalescing. "I have to go," she utters, and repeats it again and again like a mantra in the parking lot of Gunther Law Firm, while sinews and cells and atoms right themselves and trumpets blare in moral triumph.