

The Mouths of Babes

by Andrew Bowen

Moans and whispers woke me. I rubbed crust from my eyes and glanced at the G.I. Joe clock on my nightstand. 9:36. I pulled the covers back and stumbled out of my room.

The living room light was on. Father Osborne's black suit coat was draped over the back of the couch. He showed up that night after dinner. Mom said she needed to talk to him but was in no condition to go out. She never clarified said condition.

Another moan drew my attention from the coat and down the hall. A thin sliver of golden light, in the shape of an L, shone from the edge of my mother's door. I hunched over, with my arms curled up to my chest like a T-Rex, and tip-toed forward.

"Oh god...."

My ears perked. I stopped at the sound of my mother's languid voice. I surmised that maybe that's why Father Osborne was there, to introduce Mom to God, and that he actually showed.

I approached the door and stuck one eye into the lit crack. I jerked and covered my mouth. Father Osborne leaned over Mom's naked, spread legs. My eye widened and followed his hands. He held a rosary and slowly guided each crimson bead over her clitoris. Her labia swallowed and regurgitated a tiny cross with each pass. Her body shuttered as she squeezed a handful of bed sheet.

Something warm throbbed against my pajama pants. I looked down. A bulge slowly grew and pointed toward the door. I backed away, pressing my hand against my crotch, and ran into the darkness of my bedroom.

Since then I thought that the argument for or against the existence of God was moot. For the pundits it was black and white, this or that, right or wrong. I likened the argument to the battle between Coke and Pepsi: both sugar water, but with different labels.

My cynicism increased when AIDS killed Mom. I had just started high school and soon became the ward of my uncle Jerry, whose constant deployment in the Marine Corps ensured that the house was my exclusive bachelor's pad.

I found my calling in philosophy. It was the only way I could scrutinize everything and still feel as though I belonged to something.

One day in September of my junior year, a new kid arrived. He'd been homeschooled all his life in a devout Christian family. He was tall, thin and had this unassuming smile that got the girls whispering and the boys plotting. I wondered why, with his background, he'd take philosophy.

"So, because there is no verifiable proof and the concept of god fails every empirical test, one must conclude the argument for god as unsound." I looked up from my paper and met the eyes of every student in the room. Each bowed their head, except one.

"A fine argument, Jake," Mr. Peterson said from his desk. "Would anyone like to counter?"

My classmates scratched their heads and absently flipped through their textbooks. But he raised his hand. My paper crinkled as my fingers curled.

"Yes Sean, go ahead."

Everyone turned and looked at Sean as he stood.

He cleared his throat. "You're right. We can't prove God either way." Sean thrust his hands into his jean pockets and winced. "But why are unbelievers so obsessed with disproving him? Seems to me that the notion that God might exist makes you nervous—threatens your comfort level, so you try to dispel what you fear, like convincing yourself that a mysterious sound in the middle of the night was...." He shrugged with a smirk. "Just the wind."

"Well done, Sean," Mr. Peterson said. "Jake, any cross?"

I pushed Sean's face into the piss-filled toilet. He slapped and kicked at me as he gurgled in the putrid water. I pulled him up by his blonde hair.

"Any rebuttal now?"

He stuttered as he wiped his face. "Please don't!"

"Tell me god is dead and I'll stop."

He glared up at me. Streaks of red cracked along the whites of his eyes. "No."

I dunked him again. Piss water splashed onto my pants. I remembered the dry, crackled semen stain on my pants the morning after the night I watched Mom. I curled my upper lip and tilted my face back to avoid the ammonia stench.

Sean pushed himself up and locked his elbows against the seat. I leaned over with a fistful of hair and hissed in his ear. "Say it."

Yellow drops of water dripped off his nose and chin. Sean sighed and lowered his face. "God is dead...asshole."

"That a boy." I grinned and patted his back having had the pleasure of baptizing Sean into his carnal self.

Then I met Jessie.

Jessie was a biology major in college. She got off on cellular mitosis the way most girls her age were getting wet over Steven Tyler.

"It's awesome, isn't it?" she said as I struggled with my new uppercut ability on Nintendo's *Double Dragon*. She snuggled next to me, dropped a book in my lap and pointed at a picture. "The way the cells work on a chemical and industrial scale. Makes you wonder, huh?"

"Uh huh."

She nudged me. "Are you even listening?"

My character fell off a cliff. I slouched and tossed the control. "Am now."

Jessie took the book, sat on my bed and hugged her knees and text against her chest.

"I'm sorry, Jess," I said and sat beside her. I brushed my fingertips down her back.

She looked over at me and gave each eye a few seconds of attention.

"What?"

"Go to mass with me."

My fingers stopped. I shook my head and stood. "Not happening."

“Oh come on. Just once. What's the big deal?”

I turned with my eyebrows arched.

Jessie crossed her arms. “You're still not over that?”

I chuckled and turned my back to her. “Go watch your dad jerk off to a photo of Mother Teresa and then get back to me.”

I could feel her approach. The electricity of her presence buzzed over my skin. Her arms slithered under mine and pulled my back against her belly. She arched on her toes and touched the back of my neck with her soft, full lips. A warm spasm oozed over me.

I shrugged off the chill and faced her. “Okay fine. But just once.”

She grinned and planted a long kiss on my mouth. The suction of the kiss popped as she leaned back and brushed lip stick off the corner of my lips. “Thanks.”

My muscles clenched in the pew. I folded my arms and hunched over, like a star collapsing on itself, as the congregation chanted Latin in fluid monotone.

Jessie tugged my shirt sleeve. “Don't you just love it?”

I grumbled.

A smile spread on her face, warm and supple like a flower unfurling at the warm touch of dawn. “The sound just carries you. So steady and deep, like the breath of the universe.”

I pinched my brow between my fingers. All I could hear was my mother's drawn-out orgasm.

After the service, the father approached me with Jessie by his side. "So, Jessie here tells me this was your first mass. What did you think?"

"You like your opium between the ears." I shrugged. "I prefer mine between my toes."

As a reward for my limited heroism that night, Jessie fucked me like a cheap whore.

As punishment for my incredulity, a pregnancy test displayed positive.

I quit college at twenty-one and the two of us moved into a cheap apartment on the west side of town. Jessie took night classes and worked part time as a clinical assistant at the hospital. I became a construction laborer. I was the only one in my group legally able to live here. The illegals had effigies of the Virgin Mary dangling from their rearview mirrors as they pointed out their car windows and teased me in Spanish.

At first I resented Jessie for refusing an abortion. She showed me illustrations of each stage of embryonic and fetal development. She was also now a full-blown Catholic. I abdicated and trudged through my daily routine as her belly swelled.

The delivery room smelled like sweat, shit and tears. Megan looked at me from those dark gray eyes and soft, milky face and all senses failed. Gravity abandoned me. Jessie smiled with sweat glistening on her face and extended Megan to me. "Here's your little girl."

I took Megan in my arms and all seven pounds, eight ounces anchored me back to earth. Tears pooled on the surface of my eyes. I turned away and refused to let them break. I smiled so long that my face was sore for most of the next day.

Jessie eventually finished her nursing degree and worked at the same hospital. I continued with the construction gig, got promoted to foreman, and fired those illegal bastards. Megan grew to love soccer, punching boys in the crotch and the color purple.

Eight years later, Jessie was diagnosed with cervical cancer.

She cried in my arms the night before the surgery. "I don't understand. Of all the cancers...couldn't I have had just one more?"

I rubbed my hand over her bald head and pretended there was hair to hold, to smell, to get absorbed into. Anger boiled inside of me. Why indeed. She was devout and loving and...I pulled her away from me and swept tears off her cheek. I tried to smile but my lips collapsed into a frown.

"The surgery will take care of this, okay? We have Megan and that's enough. I just want you healthy, Jess."

She nodded as her lips pinched together. Three knocks tapped on the door. Jessie dabbed her eyes with a tissue. "Yes?"

The door creaked open. Megan peeked around the door with a green stuffed frog in her arms. "Mommy, I had a bad dream."

Jessie scooted back and opened her arms. "Aw baby, come here."

Megan ran up to the bed and fell into Jessie's embrace. They rocked back and forth together on the bed and harmonized "Row, row, row your boat."

I kissed the top of Jessie's glossy scalp, walked into the bathroom and flipped on the exhaust. Between the fan and their song, they couldn't hear me gnashing my teeth and pounding my fist against

my chest as I cursed it all.

The nurse rolled Jessie up next to us on a gurney. Her eyes were puffy and red, sunken into the dark gray halos of her eye sockets. Her smile glowed pink against a sea of white linens and clear plastic tubes.

Megan reached for her over the side. "Good luck Mommy."

"Thanks sweetie," she said and kissed the top of Megan's hand. "See you soon."

She released Megan's hand and reached for mine. "Come here, handsome."

I took hers, kissed it and laid my face against her chest. Her heart beat thumped inside my head. "Don't take long, okay?"

"I'll be right out," she said and kissed the back of my neck.

I lifted my head and backed away. My hand gradually slipped out of hers and fell to my side as the nurse guided Jessie between the two doors.

They couldn't control the bleeding.

Jessie's parents watched Megan for a week afterwards because I couldn't withhold my rage. The father of her church visited during that week. I broke his nose and slammed the door.

I finished reading Megan's favorite bedtime story, *Where the Wild Things Are*, and slid the book between the others on her shelf.

"Is Mommy in heaven?"

I stopped and closed my eyes. Words ignited in my throat and sizzled against my tongue. I wanted to tell her no, that Mommy was in the ground, buried forever...that everything Jessie believed in was a lie. I wanted to say that, to extinguish the fire on my tongue, but when I turned and met Megan's eyes I couldn't stand to burn her with my words.

I walked up beside her bed and sat down. "She...." I swallowed hard and shook my head. "I dunno, baby."

Megan threw back the flower print covers, set her frog aside and took my hand. "Then let's ask."

"Uh, sweetie, I—"

She scooted up on her knees and sandwiched my hand between hers as she closed her eyes and lowered her face. "God, it's Megan and Daddy. Mommy died and we want to know if she's up there with you."

"Stop," scratched against my throat as I fought to hold it back. Pressure filled my chest. Megan prayed like a slam poet, without form or pretext, the kind of chaos that creates worlds. Then I heard it. Jessie's voice out of Megan's mouth. I looked at her and stared...listened. I realized just how much she resembled Jessie. I closed my eyes as she continued.

A subtle breeze, like the wing beat of a butterfly, brushed against the back of my neck. I shuttered as the hairs on my neck stood in awareness. Reason screamed for me to turn and see what, if anything, had touched my neck. But I refused, unable to bear my conclusion either way.

