

Amen, Hallelujah

by Michelle McEwen

Forget church. That's right— forget church (Chutch, rather, the way my grandmama used to say it). I set foot in a church but once or twice, and I don't ever plan on setting foot in one again. I don't care how good looking the reverend is. All that whoopin' and hollerin' ain't good for nothing but sweating your hair out. When I was a little child, mama would say to me: "Stay home on Sunday if you want, child, but see if the boogie man don't get cha." I didn't care about no boogie man. I'd rather take my chance with the boogie man than to have to spend most of my Sunday in a bad-fitting dress, hurtin' shoes, and falling-down pantyhose. My daughters say to me: "Mama, you just too lazy to go to church." And my sons say to me: "Mama, you crazy for not going to church." But I ain't crazy or lazy. I just know *I* don't belong in no church. That's where all the heathens are anyway. You got your whore women sitting there with their legs crossed tryin to impress the reverend. Don't know why they have their legs crossed when their skirts got no more material than an oven mitt. And then you got your heavy-handed men sittin up in there like they ain't just beat up on their woman that morning. That's why I keep myself out of the church. You meet better folks in a bar. And nowadays you got people that's burning down the church. One of these days, they gon' burn down a church while people still in there whoopin' and hollerin' and carrying on.

Mama met daddy at a church. She was one of those whore women and he was one of them heavy-handed men. They made me before they made it official with rings and "I do"s. No sooner than I could hold my own bottle, mama say daddy was hittin' on her every day just 'bout. "But he would be so good to me after church," she would say and still says when I go to see her at the old folks home. Last week, when she was thinking about daddy again, she said, "On Sundays after church, when you was home alone with the boogie monster, your daddy would take me to get some ice cream and I'd

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tell him we gotta get back to make sure the child is alright and he'd shush me and say you was a grown girl— even though you wasn't." I listened to her this time and let her go on and on as if I cared about daddy. But I didn't care about daddy then and I still don't. He is somewhere farther south in Mississippi— living in his own home with another woman and still going to church every Sunday. I wonder if he's still heavy-handed. Mama, last week, when I saw her, was wondering the same thing. She said, "I wonder if your daddy beat up on that woman he with? Cousin Eidee say that woman about ten years younger than him." But I didn't answer her. I just waited until she changed the subject to church like she always does. You still ain't going to church, she said. Reverend Elway still there, she said. And instead of nodding and going along, I said to her this time, "Ma'am, you know I don't know about no Reverend Elway." Then she asked about Pastor Greer and I said, "Mama, you know I don't know about no Pastor Greer." She had frowned then and looked as if she might pinch me the way she would do when I was younger. I told her I didn't give a damn about pastors, ministers, reverends, or preachers. She kicked me out of her room then, but not before telling me I was the reason daddy left her. "I couldn't get my own daughter to go to church. That's why he took off." And she really believes this.

But I know why daddy left— took off that summer Sunday morning. He hadn't even gone to church that day. He just left— backed out of the driveway in a hurry before mama could even get down the porch steps good. Mama fell to her knees on the porch and cried for a few minutes. But her tears were all dried up by the time she was in the house putting on her church blush and lipstick. Funny how her church blush and lipstick was redder than her work blush and work lipstick. "Mama," I had said, when she was up off her knees and standing on the porch, "at least daddy can't hit you no more." Mama looked at me then like she was confused. "Child," she said, "I'm gon' miss that man." And she marched back into the house. I gave up on mama then. A woman what wants a man to beat on her needs church. But like I said, I know why daddy left. Mama

don't know it, at least I think she don't know it. I heard daddy the night before the morning he took off. He was on the back porch while mama was sleeping. He thought I was sleep, too, but I was wide-woke and I heard him talking to a man with a deeper voice than his. He had said to the man that he knew what all mama was doing and how she was carryin' on with Reverend Earl. The man on the porch with daddy said he didn't think mama was doing no such thing. You got a good woman, the man had said about mama but daddy wasn't listening. Daddy just kept whisper-hollering and going on about how mama only went to church to see Reverend Earl. "She don't go for the amen and the hallelujah and the Holy Ghost," daddy said and I could tell he was smiling. "She go for the reverend." The man on the porch with daddy kept saying he ain't think that was the case and that daddy should make sure he was sure first before leaving. That was the first I had ever heard about daddy thinking about leaving. All the beating up he done on mama, I thought she woulda left first. Now, here daddy was on the back porch at night talking with some man about leaving. I shook my head at that and went to bed hoping daddy did what he said he was gon' do— leave.

Mama got over him (going out with different men in the church and bringing them home) but didn't get over him (she kept the things daddy left behind for all to see on the front porch— his ties draped over the ledge, his pipe on his stool in the corner of the porch). She said she wanted the neighbors and the neighborhood to know she loved daddy. She wanted the other men to know daddy was the best and that they were just filling in. "Your father will be back," she said often and she waited on the porch every night, even in the winter, with her legs crossed— staying out there until she got sick of wishing that each pair of headlights belonged to daddy's car. That man who was on the porch with the deep voice was one of those men mama took up with after daddy. I once heard him say that daddy would kill him if he found out. But, I wanted to tell him, daddy only beat up on women. Mama and the man from the porch got along well until he took up with another one of those whore women from the church. I thought mama would stop going to

church for sure then and stay at home on Sundays with me, but she didn't. Her Sunday dresses just got tighter and shorter and instead of nylons, she went bare-legged.

