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Annelise Trout
Grand Valley State University

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IT'S A BOY

ANNELISE TROUT

Biddies. That's what Ronald's mother would call them, behind their backs. *The biddies are coming over today. Put on your nice shirt, the polo. And please, Ronald, PLEASE put on socks.*

And Ronald, ever the reluctant son, would trudge up the stairs, swinging his weight around the landing by keeping one hand on the knob on the banister and continuing up the second half-flight to his room, where he would throw on something in the shade of argyle or polo or button-down and slip on two socks, one black and one leaning more towards navy blue before fitting his sock-enveloped feet into his pair of black dress shoes, scuffed around the edges from playing soccer (which his mother did not know about) and certain to pinch his toes (of which his mother did indeed know from his incessant complaints).

Inevitably, Ronald would accidentally let the B-word slip (*When are the biddies going to be here, Mother?*), and his mother would smack the back of his head with whatever item she had on hand. If Ronald was lucky, it was a mere edition of some home style-magazine; if Ronald was not lucky, he may have interrupted her in the middle of her kitchen duties, and it might be a rolling pin that assaulted the base of his skull.

Ronald was not often a lucky boy.

"You don't call your aunts that word, you hear me?" his mother would screech. "I don't want to hear it

out of your mouth ever again!” The following reprimand varied slightly in its constituent phrases, but “Show respect to your elders” and “Where did you even hear that word from” were always included.

Immediately after his first admonition came the moment when his mother would notice that his two socks did not indeed match, and she would have to tell him yet again that there were multiple shades of black. Ronald never quite understood this concept; white was white, and black was black, so how could there be different types if they were seemingly absolute hues, but he would just nod until his mother stopped talking, and then he would nod once more and walk away.

Luckily for Ronald, the biddies hadn’t altogether come by that often. In fact, for as far back as Ronald could remember, they had only come one day every year, the same day every year, the day glistening paper caressed boxes and bows adorned packages, the day his father turned on the lights surrounding the tree and made sure the angel at the top was perfectly straight, like a lightning rod for God so he’d know which house to bless for the new year.

On the opposite wall hung a framed piece of embroidery with a quote from the origin of Ronald’s namesake. *If we ever forget that we are One Nation Under God, then we will be a nation gone under.* The biddies had embroidered it as a gift for Ronald’s mother after his birth, and it had hung on the wall ever since. The angel, as well, was a gift from the biddies.

They came over at two thirty for the three o’clock event. The biddies were seasoned hunters, and their predatory instincts instantly honed in on the tantalizing prey that was Ronald’s cheeks, as they pinched and twisted while Ronald bit down on his cheek and closed his eyes to keep his tears from flowing. Then the biddies moved into the kitchen, all three of them gliding as one entity as they set down pie tins from manufacturers, long-since closed, and three small packages wrapped in aluminum foil and twine. They each gave Ronald’s mother a peck on the cheek and pursed their lips at Ronald’s father, who offered to take the biddies’ coats, but as always, they shook their heads and clutched them tighter around their waning frames. After a drawn-out pause while Ronald’s mother frantically pulled a cake out of the oven, the biddies sat down in their respective chairs at the kitchen table, and Ronald’s father informed Ronald’s mother that he was being called in to work but would be back shortly. Ronald knew this could be true, but he also knew that the biddies held some level of disgust for menfolk, and Ronald’s father was never a part of the event.

Ronald, however, was a child, and was thus exempt from the category of men; as a result, he still qualified as a participant.

He sat down in the farthest chair from the biddies and kept quiet, both by choice and by force. The biddies were already muttering among themselves, their voices rough, like when Ronald took his school scissors and dragged them down the driveway to see what sound it made. Ronald’s mother gave him a dictionary to the head for that one. Unabridged.

When Ronald's mother sat down at the table, placing the sad, unfrosted cake like a peace treaty in the center next to the three pie tins the biddies had brought, their muttering ceased and they turned to her. "Congratulations," they said, not quite as one.

"Congratulations to you as well," Ronald's mother said, smiling tightly. It was a script that had never been written, but all involved parties had memorized it anyway. Ronald's part was a silent role.

"It's a boy," one of the biddies said, the one farthest to the right, although she appeared to Ronald on his left.

"God bless," said the middle one.

"Amen," said the third one.

"It's in the Bible," the first one said. "It's said that—"

"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son'—"

"And they will call him Immanuel," the third bidy finished, and the three of them murmured *Amen* in unison while they made the sign of the cross over themselves.

Ronald's mother nodded, that same tight smile on her face, and she added in an Amen and crossed herself as well.

Ronald, watching her, attempted to follow suit, poking his forehead, stomach, right shoulder, left shoulder. After realizing his mistake, he quickly tapped his left before the right and set his hands back down in his lap.

"Praise be," the first one called out, raising her hands to the air.

"Praise be."

"Praise be."

When everybody's hands were in the air, the first bidy dropped hers down and uncovered the pie tins. Involuntarily, Ronald leaned back, taking a deep breath and holding it. Ronald's mother was more subtle, holding a high-strung grimace on her face and blinking rapidly.

The first pie tin held a dead bird. The second, a dead squirrel. The third, seemingly impossibly, a dead cat. Its stiff tail spilled over the edge of the tin and onto the table.

Discreetly, Ronald's mother moved the cake a few inches away.

"It's said that Jesus will return to Earth and—"

“Return our bodies to our Heavenly home—”

“In the book of Revelations.”

“It’s said that Jesus died and—”

“Was resurrected three days later—”

“On the day we honor as Easter.”

As one, the biddies nodded, and Ronald couldn’t help but wrinkle his nose at the smell of three-day-old roadkill pervading the kitchen. Ronald wasn’t sure if the dead animals were some sort of sacrifice, or if the biddies really believed that the dead cat would get up and walk again like the blind man or Lazarus or Jesus Christ himself. Maybe they hoped Jesus was in the cat. All Ronald knew was that the driver of a pickup truck had not apparently seen Jesus in the cat, as evident via the tread marks on its mangled side.

The biddies picked up their forks and held them at the ready. Ronald’s mother carefully cut into the still-warm, unfrosted cake and forked the slices onto five plates. The biddies didn’t believe in frosting. They said it was cheating. Artificial flavoring to cover up tasteless cake. Just something to make it look pretty so you’d ignore the cardboard underneath.

Ronald still preferred frosting to no frosting. He got a slice anyway.

The three biddies sawed away at their plain cake and began gossiping about people who went to their church.

“Amelia’s baby boy has got some kind of heart trouble, right out of the womb. I heard it from Ellen, myself.”

Ronald’s mother had informed Ronald that the biddies had led the church choir for thirty years, not all at once. The first bidy had been there all thirty, as she had never married (although she often said that she took the Lord her God and Savior as her partner throughout life and what came after), but the second bidy had run off with a boy and eloped, falling out of the family graces, only to return with a child six years later. The church—with her older sister at the stern—had welcomed her graciously, almost desperately.

“I heard that the child’s father is already out of the picture.”

As for the third bidy, she had married with decency, but her husband had gone off to The War—Ronald wasn’t sure which one that was, but everyone knew it as The War, capital t, capital w—and hadn’t come back. Or he had, in a coffin. That’s when she had ended up in the choir along with her two elder sisters, fulfilling her grievous widow phase until—well, she had never truly stopped. But it was hard to tell, Ronald thought, because all the biddies—not just his biddies, but biddies in general—owned wardrobes

of gaudy black sweaters.

“Men,” the third biddy clucked. The three biddies nodded to that, and if they had been the drinking sort, Ronald imagined that they would have toasted.

And those were the biddies. Where life had failed them, God had not, and they repaid His gift to them with a baby shower for his son each December twenty-fifth.

“The cake is delicious,” said the first biddy.

“I’m glad it doesn’t have frosting,” said the second.

“Frosting is the work of the devil,” said the third. Ronald wasn’t so sure about that.

Ronald’s father arrived home shortly, although Ronald couldn’t recall the sound of a car door shutting or the garage door opening. He greeted the biddies with a strained cordiality, his smile spread thinly, too horizontal and linear to be real. “Ladies.” A pause. “Ronald.”

Ronald waved at his dad before sticking his hand back in his lap when one of the biddies narrowed her eyes at him slightly.

“I almost forgot,” the first biddy said. “The presents. Give them the presents.”

The second biddy nodded sharply and delicately handed one aluminum-foil-and-twine-ensnared package to Ronald’s mother, then one to Ronald. The last, she paused before handing to Ronald’s father, but she made sure her fingers never touched his, and she took her hand off the package just as soon as Ronald’s father’s hand closed around it.

There was a moment of stillness, and then Ronald’s mother put on another obligatory smile. “All right, open it, Ronald.” With a nod towards Ronald’s father, all three began to fumble with the twine and peel back the aluminum foil, each of them uncovering the same gift, the same gift the biddies had been giving them—and, presumably, everyone—for as long as they had gifts to give.

“Thank you,” Ronald’s mother said, smiling at the biddies, her words slightly slow as she enunciated carefully. Ronald couldn’t be sure if they were hard of hearing because, on one hand, they were old, but on the other, he had the sure feeling that if he whispered or even just thought something naughty under his breath, they’d know. “Ronald, thank your great-aunts.”

“Thanks,” Ronald said.

“Thank you,” Ronald’s mother corrected.

“Thank you,” Ronald said, looking down at the Bible in his hands. He’d put it on the bookshelf with the

others, just as soon as he took off the pinchy-toed shoes and black-and-not-black socks.

“They’re lovely,” Ronald’s mother said graciously, smiling at the biddies. “Truly.”

Ronald held silent. He still didn’t know who King James was or why he’d written the Bible if kings were supposed to have hated Jesus or how he had even known about Jesus in the first place if he’d been somewhere in Europe and Jesus was wandering around in Israel or somewhere in the Middle East with Al-Qaeda. On a whim, Ronald flipped open the book and pushed a few pages to the left until he stopped under the heading Genesis.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

Ronald already knew that bit.

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

And Ronald was already quite lost. He couldn’t quite wrap his mind around a planet that was there but wasn’t, because if it didn’t exist yet, then just where was God? And he didn’t understand all the faces. There was the face of the deep and the face of the waters. As far as Ronald knew, neither had faces. To be honest, he didn’t even know what “the deep” was. Was it like The War, something everybody except Ronald seemed to know and understand? What was The Deep? And did it have a face?

Ronald didn’t think so.

And so, Ronald closed the book, sighing. He didn’t close the book out of lack of belief. He knew God was real, just like he knew that he shouldn’t spit on the sidewalk. Because he’d been told that it was so, and after having been told enough, it had become an irrefutable truth to him. So it wasn’t that Ronald didn’t believe God was up there somewhere.

Ronald just didn’t understand. He thought that God might have made sense to him if Ronald had been alive back when King James was writing the Bible. Then he would have known what The Deep was and if it had a face. But Ronald wasn’t, and he didn’t, and that was that. God was there, probably, but He wasn’t here. That was the problem, Ronald supposed. He had never found God in the world by himself. It was always someone else’s finger pointing out Jesus to him. Or God. Ronald couldn’t quite see the difference, although if everyone said there was one, there was.

Ronald decided to go put the book in his room sooner rather than later, simply to get away from the reeking pie tins. He went up the stairs, leaving his poorly-fitted shoes on as he set the book to the right of all the previous books, always in sight, but not enough as to be always in mind. But still close, in the hope that Ronald would one day understand what it was really about and why his mother’s copy – or rather, one of her dozens – was dog-eared and highlighted while his remained in pristine condition.

Keeping the book in pristine condition didn't seem to be the name of the game, another source of mystery to Ronald.

He lingered for a long minute, taking in the fresh air before retreating back to the kitchen. He stopped short.

The third bidy—or, at least, Ronald was pretty sure it was the third one—was sitting upright in a chair, coughing violently, her hands clawing at her throat as her face slowly darkened from shriveled-rice white to a pale blue.

Ronald's mother was frozen, her hand on the phone that was lashed to the wall with a cord.

The second bidy was watching the first.

The first bidy was calmly watching the third.

Ronald took a step towards the third bidy, his mind hazy with panic, but the first bidy's words stopped him again.

"Don't move."

"But she's choking," Ronald said, staring at her, unable to look away.

"If God chooses to save her, He will save her," the first bidy said, slowly sawing a square off the corner of her slice of cake with her fork and popping it into her mouth.

"But what if He doesn't save her?" Ronald asked, his voice quiet and uneven as though he, too, were choking. And he was, merely on a different material. Belief.

"If God chooses not to save her, then no mortal doctor has a chance," the first bidy said decisively. "Do you believe in God, Ronald?"

"Yes." A trained response, but it wasn't a lie.

"But do you trust God?"

"I..." Ronald could not go on.

"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." The first bidy turned her narrowed eyes to Ronald for the first time. "You asked what would happen if God does not save her. Not what, Ronald, but why. Ask yourself that. Does he condemn her because she does not love God, or because not saving her will work together for her good?" The first bidy turned back to stare at the third. "Does she love God?" the bidy whispered, her

voice sharp. “Let’s find out.”

Ronald wanted to move. He’d been taught what to do in school. He could run over and stand behind the chair, put his arms in front of her, yank back. He could save her. But Ronald knew that he wasn’t God, just like he knew that the cat wasn’t God either.

So Ronald didn’t move. He watched, hoping that nobody else would have to be the finger to point out God to him, that he’d catch it himself this time, and that, once he saw God, he’d know what The Deep was and if it had a face. He’d read the first page of the book, of the Bible, and then he’d read the second, and the third, all the way until The End. But he had to see God first. Had to know that King James wasn’t one big liar. He had to know.

He had to know, and so he stood there, watching the third biddy along with all the others, waiting for God to come down through the angelic lightning rod and into their homey little kitchen.

Ronald knew when it was time. God was going to come now, or he was never coming. The third biddy’s face was almost entirely blue. She attempted a desperate inhale.

Everyone looked up at the ceiling. Their eyes were watching God.