

Boone

On a bookshelf in a Goodwill thrift shop, a tiny book, “Does God Have a Big Toe?” by Marc Gellman, caught my eye. Based on Bible myths, it took me back to the year Mother died and I met God.

Mother didn’t feel like opening Christmas gifts, but she enjoyed watching me open mine. The day after Christmas, she went to the hospital. When she came home in March, Dad had a bed for her in our living room. Because she was sick, Mrs. Blair came to help. She was old enough to be my grandmother, and I liked her a lot.

One day I got home from school, and Mom’s bed was empty. Just like that. She was gone. Whenever my dad looked at me, tears came to his eyes and he choked. It bothered me a lot. I wondered if I had done something wrong.

After school was out, with time on my hands, I got permission from Mrs. Blair to hang out with Claude. He was 13, four years older than me. He knew I had no friends in the neighborhood, so he took me with him when he went to play baseball and let me play in the outfield.

On my way to Claude’s, I came up behind an old man on the sidewalk carrying two sacks. He didn’t seem very steady. He halted, then went on again. When I got near him, one bag began to slip from his arms, and I caught it before it spilled.

“Thanks,” he said. “You came along at the right time.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “Where do you live?”

“Just across the street. I’ll rest on this bench for a few minutes. I guess I bought too much,” he said. His breathing was labored.

He asked me my name.

“Daniel, but everybody calls me Boone. What’s your name?”

“My name is God.” He said it just like you’d say, “My name is Henry,” or “My name is George.”

I never thought I’d meet God walking down the sidewalk in my neighborhood. I never thought about meeting God anywhere. “Do you mean God, like . . . in the Bible, or in church?”

“The same,” he said.

I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing. When we reached his house, I placed the shopping bag on a table on his front porch. He didn’t ask me in, and I wouldn’t have gone in anyway. I knew about “stranger danger.”

When I got to Claude's house, his mom said he was swimming at the "Y," so I headed back home. The old man was still on his front porch, asleep, I think.

As soon as I got home, I headed straight for the kitchen. I could smell the cookies Mrs. Blair was taking out of the oven. "Back so soon?" she said.

"Claude wasn't home. He went swimming . . . We have a new neighbor, an old man. He's in the house where the Norton's used to live. He said his name was God."

Mrs. Blair didn't think very long about that. She smiled and said, "Sounds like he might belong in some sort of home where people can look after him. What did he look like?"

"He's old, skinny. His clothes sagged. His hair's gray, sort of silver."

Mrs. Blair said, "He's probably got family who keep an eye on him."

The next day, on my way to Claude's, the old man was sitting on his front porch. He waved, so I stopped to say hi. "I told Mrs. Blair you said your name was God. She wanted to know what you looked like."

"And who's Mrs. Blair?"

"She takes care of me while Dad's at work."

"Don't you have a mother?"

When I thought about mother, I had a hard time not crying. I still missed her—in the morning, after school, at supper, at bedtime. I missed her in ways I had no words for.

"My mom had cancer."

"I'm sorry," he said.

I had to change the subject. "I told Mrs. Blair you didn't look like God."

"Really? And what does God look like?"

"I've seen a few pictures in books. You don't look like any of them."

"Does God look the same in all the pictures?"

"No. In one of them, God has an arm that looks like he's been working out. In all the pictures, he has lots more hair than you do."

He said. "Maybe the people who made the pictures were just guessing."

The next day, my dad and I drove past the Norton house. The old man was on his front porch. I smiled and waved, and he waved back. Dad pulled over, and we walked up to the porch. “Hi. I’m Boone’s father. Welcome to the neighborhood. I understand you two met a couple of days ago.”

“Yes. Boone was a great help. He’s a good boy.”

On the way home, Dad said, “He looks harmless enough, but don’t be too friendly. Sometimes older people are unpredictable. Not because they’re bad. They lose their self-control. Just don’t bug him.” Then he added, “You’re right, son. He doesn’t look like God to me, either.”

Even though I couldn’t match wits with the old man, the next day I gave it a shot. “How do I know you’re God?”

“Why do you think I’m not?”

“You look old—but not that old,” I said.

He said, “I thought we already settled that you can’t tell by looking.”

I could have asked him to do some kind of miracle I guess, but testing God didn’t occur to me. At the time, hanging out with Claude was more important.

The last time I saw him at the Norton house, I talked about something I should have brought up the first time I met him, but I didn’t. “My Sunday school teacher said when we get sick, if we pray, God makes us well. I prayed, and Mom didn’t get well.”

“Your teacher was close. When a person dies, I feel sad, like you and your dad. I care, but I don’t heal people. What kind of God would I be if I healed some people and skipped others? If you give me credit when someone gets well, you should blame me when someone doesn’t.”

“Did I cause my Mom to get sick?”

“You? You didn’t make your mother sick any more than I did. You and I would never do that. Don’t blame yourself for something you didn’t cause.”

“I thought I must have done something bad. My Sunday school teacher says when we’re bad, bad things can happen to us. He says we ought to feel sorry and try to stop doing bad things.”

“He’s right. Feeling sorry can sometimes help us change.”

So I asked him, “Do *you* ever feel sorry?”

“Oh, yes,” he said. “I’ve felt sorry many times. A lot of people have suffered because of

My mistakes.”

It wasn't long before the Norton house was empty again. I didn't think about the old man any more until one day I met Claude getting off the bus. He said he heard music at the bus stop downtown. There sat God, on a folding stool, playing a violin. A few people were dropping money in his music case on the sidewalk. A couple of high school boys were laughing and making a lot of noise while their friend took money from his violin case. They all ran and jumped on the bus.

“Did you try to stop them?”

“No. I didn't want to get beat up.”

“Are you sure it was God?”

“I could tell. He figured out I was your friend. I told him I saw the boys and asked him why he didn't yell or call the cops. He said he knew what they were doing. He said it's just stuff. It didn't bother him. I told the cops. They talked to him, but they didn't do anything.”

Several weeks later I spotted an old man pushing a shopping cart along my street. He stopped to pick up a soda can. Seeing a violin case in his cart made me take a closer look. He needed a shave, and probably a bath, but it was him.

“God!” I said. Was I talking to God, or swearing? “What happened?”

“Hi, Boone. I lost my house. I didn't have any place to go, so here I am.” He didn't act depressed or anything. “I don't need much to get by,” he said.

“How do you eat? Where do you sleep?”

“I get donations when I play my violin, and I collect enough cans to pay for lunch when I'm hungry. Poverello House serves breakfast and dinner, and they give out changes of clothes each week. They have beds, too, but on clear nights I sleep outdoors to enjoy the stars.”

His clothes were soiled, and his hands were dirty. He saw me looking down at his hands. “As for the dirt on my clothes and my hands, remember, Boone, I made the dirt, too.” When I forgot he was God, a remark like that—about him making the dirt—brought me right back. He wasn't like anyone else I've ever known.

I haven't seen him since I met him that day on the street pushing a shopping cart, but when I see an old person picking up cans, I slow down, hoping to see a familiar face. The one thing I figured out about God is he's old. He's got to be old, right? Maybe, maybe not.

Who knows?