

## Ellen Weeren

### Trying to Wrestle a Cat from a Tree

Although Thomas stood like a giant at 6'7", he felt very small that Easter Sunday.

But only because his mother had shortened the sleeves on his one good church shirt because she felt like his sleeves should show—and not his shirt cuff but the tattooed sleeve of his right arm, covered from one end to the other with a mermaid whose tail started at the tippest tip of his cuff line and floated all the way up to his neck line, where her long hair and wide eyes rolled along the curve of his shoulder. The mermaid was surrounded by sea creatures his mother had never seen in their landlocked little town. Sea horses, peacock shrimp, and starfishes pranced along his forearm like it was the ocean floor.

"Can hide that shit from me with your father's old flannel shirt," she said, "but not from God." When she pushed the smoked-out end of her cigarette deep into the green glass ash tray, the smoke faded without much pressure.

"Don't you know God don't care about a little ink," he said but knew it was as futile as trying to wrestle a cat from a tree. Everyone was better off when things got to sit where they wanted to sit and no one got scratched.

Francesa Dowdy, who was now on her fifth and final last name, refused to understand that though. She was always trying to change something or somebody, for the better she would claim.

"Good people," she often said while picking a stray piece of meat from her back teeth with a toothpick from the diner where she worked, "were allowed to throw stones from glass houses if their intentions were pure and their hearts were right with the Lord."

"Haven't you got your own secrets," Thomas wanted to ask. Instead, he simply said, "Yes, ma'am."

"Just know that people are watching what you do. The kid is a reflection of the mother, like it or not. You're my legacy, and being thirty don't change that."

"Love that so much mama," he said and tugged at the plaid edges of his cuff. Mama didn't know that he had finger tattoos in his future, right on the top of the knuckles. Never mind, the one with her second last name that he planned for the nape of his neck. Octopus tendrils would serve as the tails of the letters that spelled out "Mama Tucker," for all her friends to gawk at. He'd get them before the funeral. You could be sure of that.

Well, most likely he would do it. Right then, he was sure of it. Sometimes, though, he just wanted to get a matching tattoo with his mama.

"Mama, you should get a tattoo. Something silly like a catfish."

"You stop, boy." She swiped her hand in the air as if a fly was getting too close to her eye. "It ain't gonna happen. I've had enough of needles."

The thing was that she probably did want one, too, if God wasn't so aware of every single thing she did.

Understand that she tried to be good, but when the spotlight of the sun faded, it was hard to keep herself away from a little bit of hooch and even more so from the hoochy cootchy of an able-bodied man. The worst of it was the tar-filled cigarettes that stained her teeth, her good conscience, and the tippiest tip of her lungs. So, for her, not getting a tattoo was like planting a flag on the moon—it meant a long journey of resisting something.

“Velma’s meeting us at the diner for lunch,” she said. “Wonder what’s on her mind this time.”

“The x-rays probably.”

“You think? That’s been settled.”

“With Velma, nothing is settled. She wants you to get treatment.”

“I’m getting pancakes, heavy on the butter and extra syrup.”

“Mama, that would make a great tattoo.” He smiled.

For a flicker of a second, she considered it then waved her hand in the air again. “Stop it, boy.”

On Monday, he’d make an appointment at Inkwells for two people. He’d tell his mama the doctor needed to see her. Then he’d let her decide catfish or star. Both were worth catching.

When they got there, he’d tell her that he loved her and that God didn’t give a goddamn if a son needed something to hold onto when his mama was gone.

