

Mother

What keeps you going when the whole world around you is falling apart? My mother had her religion. She was a Catholic and believed everything the Pope said. It all changed the day I brought home the charming and most handsome, 20-year-old Hank. During the whole visit he focused solely on Mom and he completely bowled her over.

"What a nice boy," she said, after he had left. She cast a glance my way suggesting I had some catching up to do partner wise.

"He's gay." I said. You could almost hear the wheels in her head grinding. According to Catholicism gays were sinners and very sick people. Being gay just wasn't natural. Still she couldn't find a single thing the matter with Hank. His muscular body was, unfortunately, clad, but my mother's piercing glance could see right through the thin veneer.

"Nothing wrong with watching," Mom used to say, "Watch, don't touch."

She was a 70-year-old widow. Having Hank nearby made her look 20 years younger. Had my father still been alive, she would have tossed away her wedding ring without a second thought, but Hank didn't give her even the slightest encouragement, except for his undivided attention. My usually coy mother showed suspicious signs of a cougar-in-heath and only when he had torn himself away and bid us a hasty goodbye, did she remember that Hank would have been a much better match for me, considering our ages.

With both feet planted once more firmly on the carpet she sighed. "I never thought I would hear myself say this, but the Pope must be mistaken. What can he do? He's human after all. Gays can never hurt women the way heterosexuals can. I won't talk ill of the dead and your father was a gentleman, although I suspected him of having one or two flings on the side. The strange thing is that we never had any meaningful conversation about fashion or art and you know how I love that.

Oh well, a gay husband isn't everything. I'm glad Hank has let you in, before it's too late. What did you say? He got out of the closet? I like the idea of all promiscuous heterosexuals crammed together in a tight spot. Bet you, they would all turn gay within seconds. I'm sure your father, God rest his soul, would anyway. A pity though, for the next generation. Gays deserve to have a lot of offspring. I love his hair. Do you think his hairdresser could do anything for me?"

I couldn't believe I was hearing this. Was this the same woman who used to tell us there was only one Truth and that was in the sole possession of her Faith? From that day on her saying 'The Pope knows best' was changed into 'Religion is shaped by people. People make mistakes. Religion doesn't.'

The security and comfort my mother found in her faith was alien to me. When I was 12 a teacher talked in class about Darwin. My brother of 6, Ben, whom I saw as a living doll, but who actually was inquisitive and sweet as long as I fed him enough scraps of information, was selected to be

the first one to receive the breaking news. We climbed into the tree hut, as high as we could get and as far away as possible from Mother's reach.

"I am an atheist", I said.

"What is that?" my brother asked.

"Someone, who believes there is no God." His eyes grew as big as saucers. I was the first person in his life, who had the courage to say anything this radical and I even had a pretty word for it, too.

I grew in his eyes with the speed of a rocket. I might not believe in God, but at that moment I was convinced that in the beginning there was the Word.

"Why?" Ben whispered, afraid of being overheard and stricken dead.

"Well, there was this man called Darwin. He sailed all around the globe and he drew very good pictures of all the different animals he saw. Then he compared them and guess what? He discovered that people and apes are alike, just like horses and cows. Do you know we still have a little bone, right here, where a tail used to be? That isn't mentioned anywhere in the Bible."

Ben's eyes almost popped out of their sockets. "Have you read the Bible?"

"No Silly, but the teacher has. Anyway that bone at the end of your back is called the os coccygis in Latin. Doctors learn this language in school, but their patients don't know a word. It's a kind of secret code. Next year I'll be taught it, too."

I gave Ben a brief while to digest the crucial information about my important future (Nobel prize winner who disclosed THE secret language to the world) and continued: "Our priest knows Latin, too. If you want to be a priest or a doctor, you must be able to read very old books. All of them were written in Latin. The Romans from Italy were the most powerful people in the whole world and everybody had to speak and write Latin. Those doctors and priests don't tell anyone about that little tail bone. If they did, people would, of course, make a run on clinics and churches.

"Doctor," they would say, "my dog has an actual tail in that spot. I demand one, too," and "Father, you must baptize the cat and the parrot."

We fell over laughing so hard we almost dropped down into the dirt.

"Wow," my brother said, when he was able to speak again, "then I'm an atheist, too. Are atheists also against baptism?"

I was filled with admiration. Ben was really smart. "Of course they are against baptism. No God, no baptism."

"O.K., want to race my cars?" I immediately agreed and thus rewarded him for becoming an atheist within a mere 5 minutes.

The following Sunday morning Mom found Ben in his pajamas in the sandbox. She was frowning down at him, her hands planted firmly at her sides. "Ben, go and get ready for church right now."

Ben stubbornly shook his head. "I'm not going to church."

"I don't believe my ears. Why not?"

"I'm an atheist."

"Do you even know the meaning of that word?"

Ben looked up at my mother and nodded.

"Well?"

"An atheist doesn't believe in God."

"What?!"

"An atheist doesn't believe in God. I'm an atheist, so I don't have to go to church".

"Where did you get that rubbish?"

"From Iris." (That's me.)

"IRIS, COME HERE AT ONCE! Ben, go and get dressed right this minute and I meant a minute ago.

I never want to hear you talk such filth again, hear me? Next time I'll wash out your mouth with plenty of soap and a big wooden brush that'll stretch your lips from here to kingdom come."

Ben disappeared in a flash. I was right behind the door in my Sunday dress, listening in with shaking knees. I almost wet my panties when her voice blasted my name. I shuffled slowly into her imposing presence, too afraid to look her in the eye.

"Iris, don't you believe in God?"

I tried avoiding an answer with a meek: "I told Ben about Darwin".

"Do you know what I believe?" Her voice suddenly sounded as calm as a mountain brook.

All the tension had vanished. I peeked up at her for the first time. "What?"

"I believe that heaven is here on earth. I consider myself lucky, because I know this to be true.

Some people believe heaven's waiting for them after death. Or hell if they haven't been paying any attention while still alive and breathing. But hell, too, is right here and now. For those who don't know."

I looked down, feeling her penetrating glare burning my skull. What 12-year-old could counter such convincing signs of a true believer? For the first time in my life I felt guilty. The devil himself had forced his way into my heart. I had filled Ben's mind with anti-Christian propaganda. I hadn't been living the good life. So this was hell. I could hardly contain the tears I felt prickling behind my eyes, but Mom hated crybabies.

Only once had she threatened me with 'When you're crying for no reason, I'm going to give you one.' I continued whining and played deaf. I never knew what hit me, but in hindsight it must have been her. In any case, I have never needed a reminder of that baffling experience.

She almost pushed her face into mine, checking for signs of water. I saw only blurry lines blocking the light and two big white rings. I still was very scared and stopping at once all telltale signs of fear and self-pity. My eyes flew open to their limits, causing whatever fluids were floating around there to evaporate instantly, giving me a shocked, but dry look.

At last, Mother was convinced I wasn't going to cry. She ordered me to wait in the car and added: "I'll pray for you." Later in church Ben and I sat next to her as sweet as pies. There was just no way to resist Mom. Maybe I didn't believe in God, but I truly believed my mother ruled over my heaven or hell right here on this very planet.