There's An Airplane In Our Yard

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The Question
by K.E. Schoppe

As I stand at the kitchen sink washing the breakfast dishes, I hear his shuffle on the stairs. His low heavy breathing becomes more audible as he descends the stairs and crosses the kitchen to seat himself at the table. He draws his blue terrycloth bathrobe around his thin bare legs and stares at his hands.

This man is my husband's father. We seldom greet one another in the conventional way. There are no "good mornings" between us; we merely co-exist with little warmth or communication. Yet, this morning, there is communication.

He opens his rusty old mouth to speak. "Do you think there's an afterlife?" he asks. "Do you think there's a heaven?" He asked this same question yesterday morning but I avoided answering by simply walking away. I know I can't escape a second time because the tone of his voice is too insistent. He reaches for an orange, begins removing the peel and waits for my answer.

Why should I answer his question at all? Why should I respond to this old man who has caused me such grief in the six years since he came to live in my house? When he first came, following his wife's death, I felt sorry for him and tried to please him. But I learned my lesson hard and fast. He's not to be trusted. He's a betrayer of loyalties and love; a bitter old man who finds no joy in life and resents the joy of others.

He feels he is entitled to all those things he never thinks of giving. What right does he have to ask me this question regarding his soul?

There exists an enormous gulf between us. We have nothing in common. He knows nothing of literature, philosophy, music or art. He is a caveman once removed, motivated by ancient fears and beliefs. Yet, his blood flows in my children's veins. Was he once as bright and new as they?

As I steal a glance at his blank face, it's incomprehensible that this man, who sits at my kitchen table, was created in God's image. I would never think to ask him the same question he has asked of me because I have no confidence in his answer. He, however, retains a child's faith that someone will know the truth of it. Does he value my opinion or is he testing me? I'll never know.

But wait, perhaps we do have something in common after all. This useless old man and I would both like to have an answer to the question of our final and eternal destiny. He asked me the same question a few years ago and I answered, "No." I told him I do not believe in an afterlife. I wanted to hurt him and tried to do it in this way. I don't want to hurt him now, therefore, I answer "Yes." This is not an answer from the heart. I turn to catch the look on his face and discern a slight smile. He seems satisfied with the affirmation of what I suddenly realize he always believed to be so.