

GOD IS DEAD

By Debbie Miller

WHY WE LIKE IT: *There exists the misconception that comedic writing is an easier gig than stories that are ‘dark-themed’ but we don’t agree. As in standup, timing and word choice make or break and things can go wrong very quickly with comedy. More than most genres, it runs the risk of being overtly self-conscious—like someone laughing at their own jokes. The author gallantly sidesteps these landmines to deliver an entertaining and droll comedy of modern manners. The characters are wonderfully realized in a carefully crafted off hand manner and the understated final sentence is one of the strongest endings we’ve read in a while. But what we really love love love is the self-deprecating, long suffering voice of the young narrator. Quote: ‘I’m getting my English composition book out of my bag when she lunges at me with a pair of library scissors that look like the pruning shears our gardener uses back home. I spot Karen a few tables away and fear she may be about to witness a murder. People like my parents will study this phenomenon and write dissertations about it. They call it *Scholasticide*.’*

“You, with the hair!”

I’m sitting in the school library. I’ve been in the United States—North Olmsted, Ohio, to be exact—three weeks and my parents have enrolled me in summer school to give me a head start on the fall when I’ll enter ninth grade.

I’m at this ancient, ink-stained oak table covered with pithy phrases gouged into its surface, admiring the calligraphy of one particularly artistic “Eat Me” carving, when Mrs. Grimms, the school librarian tears into me.

Mrs. Grimms is built like a linebacker. She's wearing a plaid, red and gray pleated wool skirt and a bulky black cardigan with giant buttons, sleeves rolled up exposing her hairy forearms. Her outfit looks more suited to the 1940s than 1967 – un-hip on so many levels, definitely not groovy. Her hands are enormous. Her hair, which is short and straight and black, like Moe of *The Three Stooges*, with a streak of gray above her left temple, is shorter than mine.

She dives at me like a hawk swooping down to devour a field mouse. Her eyes sparkle through her black spectacles and she positively glows like someone's just offered her a bathtub full of M&Ms.

"Your pass from study hall."

"Uh, I'm not sure I have it."

She's not buying it. You can't fool librarians. There was one back in my neighborhood in London who could read minds. She looked like she was sleeping, but she was just focusing real hard, in some kind of meditative state like those Indian gurus who can sit still for days on end. She could spot trouble from across the room. Although I can't imagine Mrs. Grimms sitting still for even a minute. She's always moving, like a caged tiger; trying to pick up library infractions on her radar.

Her mouth curls like a line on an Etch A Sketch. "That's too bad, because if you can't produce your it, I'll have to send you to the principal's office. If I were you, I'd find it."

"Yes, Ma'am."

She stands with her arms folded over her chest, her man hands hidden under her gigantic bosom.

I have the pass, but debate whether being sent to the principal's office wouldn't be less of a hassle than matching wits with Mrs. Grimms. I decide it's not a good idea to get dispatched to

the authorities so soon after arriving in America, so I dig the crumpled pass out of my pocket and offer it up.

She snatches it, then squints and inspects it with her giant fish eyes. I glance at the aquarium tank on the wall behind her, thinking she'd feel right at home in there.

"I can't read it," she mutters. I shrug my shoulders, but inside I'm squirming while she mulls over her answer.

"I'll let it go this time, but from now on, fold it neatly and put it in your notebook -- not in your filthy pocket." She tosses it at me and it lands on one of the more prominent "Fuck You's" engraved in the table.

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Two months ago, we're in the middle of dinner—soy steaks in miso sauce with root vegetables and brown rice--when my parents tell my brother Jeremy and me that we're moving to the States.

"It's an educational opportunity," says Keith. "Living in a different culture expands your horizons. Social Anthropology is *happening* in the States. Here in Britain, it's stagnant—all studies of pre-colonial Africa tribes. In America, the sky's the limit."

Felicity and Keith got married their first year at university, then went to graduate school and did fieldwork together in Kenya, with me and my brother in tow. After that, they got jobs in London and, now they've been hired to share a professorship chair at Case Western University in Cleveland, a big deal in the Anthropology world. I hated leaving my mates, but figured if it was that important to my parents, I could tough it out in America. How bad could it be?

According to the *Cleveland Press*, no sooner had we touched down at Hopkins Airport than we started complaining we were misunderstood and subjected to discrimination. We didn't

seek out publicity—it found us. Two weeks after we arrive, a reporter interviews us and spends most of the interview asking about our hair.

Keith tells him he doesn't understand why it's an issue. He says long hair is a tradition in our family. But, everyone in North Olmsted thinks we're hippies, even though it's 1967 and everyone's got long hair. Keith calls North Olmsted provincial and bourgeois.

The day after the article is published, we find a dead squirrel in our mailbox and dog poo smeared on the front door. Then, the phone calls begin (the newspaper published our address and phone number), day and night. We change our phone number three times, but the calls don't stop.

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To say our arrival rankled the citizens of sleepy North Olmsted would be an understatement. Not only do we have long hair, but we're vegetarians. When Felicity casually mentions this, the reporter gloms onto it like a snail in an aquarium tank. Man, nobody in America is vegetarian. America is the home of McDonald's, Sunday pot roast, cowpokes, and cattle. Our family rejects everything this country stands for. We may as well wear the American flag on our bums.

When I get home from school, I walk into the kitchen to look for something to eat. The only sound is the drone of the ancient refrigerator. I scan its contents: mushrooms, tofu, bean sprouts. My stomach is growling as I consider the veggie loaf, a pale gray blob with shades of brown, and reconsider. I grab celery sticks and tofu spread for my snack, if you can call that a proper snack. The other kids at school eat pizza and candy bars. I hate being vegetarian. Back home, I used to eat chicken biryani twice a week with my Pakistani friend, Sami. It would kill my parents if they knew.

Our kitchen looks like a jungle. Felicity has managed to find about a million plants in just a few weeks. She fancies herself an herbalist. The kitchen is less kitchen, than *still room*.

Felicity concocts her own herbal remedies because she doesn't want to use conventional medicine. Her book collection lines the wall with titles like *Food is Your Medicine*, and *Eat Your Way to Health*.

But, being vegetarians is nothing compared to the hatred we face for being atheists. Keith let that slip during the newspaper interview. I read somewhere that to Americans, Atheists rank at the bottom of the moral barrel, just below rapists and child molesters. So, in the eyes of North Olmsted we Edmunds are godless, moral-less heathens. The newspaper describes Keith and Felicity as "ruthlessly unapologetic" about their atheism. They might as well be convicted murderers instead of the gentle, idealistic scholars they are. Most people don't question the existence of a deity and don't see believing or not believing as a personal choice the way my parents do.

*

So, Keith and Felicity sell our London flat and buy a house in North Olmsted on the advice of the University's Anthropology department. The real estate broker assures them North Olmsted is the perfect place for a family like ours. After we arrive at Cleveland Hopkins airport, we get a taxi to our new home. It's a cloudless June day and "Respect" is playing on the radio. I see it as a sign of good things to come. *Don't worry*, I tell Jeremy, *America is going to be great*. He's younger than me and takes my word for everything.

It's a short ride, past street after street of manicured lawns with black-faced lawn jockeys who probably wonder what they're doing in the suburbs.

"Excuse me, sir," I ask the driver. "Will we be going through any ethnic neighborhoods?"

“Any what?”

“You know, places where Pakistani or Indian people live? Immigrants, I mean.”

“Good one. You had me going there for a minute, son!”

He pulls up to a white Colonial clapboard house surrounded by a weedless lawn. “Here we are. One of the safest neighborhoods in Cleveland. No coloreds, just white folks like you and me. The schools are the best, too.”

The house looks like it’s had a new coat of white paint. A rather blinding white, in fact. The neighborhood is white, too. I’d heard America was a melting pot, but since we left the airport, I haven’t seen one person who doesn’t look like they’ve just stepped out of a laundry soap commercial.

*

The next time I go to the library, my hall pass is neatly folded and stowed inside my notebook. I’m following the rules. After all, I’m new in the country; I need to blend in. Felicity and Keith tell me that America is a place where you’re allowed to be an individual as long as you show people you’re making an effort to fit in.

I take out my notebook to get a head start on my English homework when a shadow falls over my paper. I look up to see Mrs. Grimms, hovering.

“You again,” she says.

I stand and produce my hall pass, flashing my best smile.

“So, what’s with the hair? Are you a boy or a girl?”

I brush my hair from my eyes. I’d never been asked that before. It wasn’t an issue in Britain, where my hair, which barely covers my ears, is shorter than most of the blokes in my class.

“Get a haircut, *hippy!*” She kicks my chair with her clunky librarian shoes. The flab under her chin giggles like Jell-O and her breath smells like burnt toast.

Then, she shoves me and when she tugs at my hair I nearly fall out of my seat, so I duck and cover my head. I read in a book that American school kids in the 1950s practiced this drill to protect themselves in case of nuclear attack.

She yanks my hair. Some kids are starting to stare, tearing themselves away from the Archie comic books hidden inside the textbooks they’re fake-reading. The dim schoolhouse lights glare down on the pitiful scene.

I spy Karen, my new best friend, watching it all go down from across the room where she’s reading her Geography book.

*

I miss a lot of things about England: my Gran (Gran Allen, Felicity’s Mum), my drum kit. I had to leave it back in London with my friend Eddie. We were about to start a band when my parents got word about the job in the states. I had a lot of friends in London. But, I wasn’t sure I’d have friends in America, until I met Karen.

Karen was the first person to speak to me the day I entered North Olmsted Junior High. She was carrying a stack of textbooks and wore a pencil over one ear and a pink barrette over the other. The pencil was covered in teeth marks and her nails looked like they’d been bitten down by a raccoon. She was the blondest person I’d ever met and the white cat-eye glasses attached to a chain around her neck matched her white angora sweater and made her look even whiter.

I’m wandering the halls trying to find my locker. I stop a couple of blokes to ask for help, but they just scrunch up their faces and walk away. Karen walks right up to me, puts out her hand, and says “Hi, I’m Karen Peterson. You’re new here, right? I just love your hair.” She

smiles and flashes a mouthful of metal. She talks fast and is direct, but in a friendly way, which is what we Brits have heard about Americans. She's got bullocks. I like that.

"Are you finding everything okay?" she asks as she eyes the paper bearing my locker number. She leads me to another hallway and spots my locker, which has definitely seen better days. She inspects it, then motions for me to follow her as she leads me to the office where she tells the secretary I've been given a locker with a bent door that doesn't close properly. The secretary assigns me a new one and Karen leads me to it.

"You're from England, right?" she asks as we make our way down the hall. "That's a great accent. Have you met the Beatles? I'm a big Beatlemaniac. Ringo's my favorite. Your hair's just like his. Far out! Who's your favorite? No, don't tell me! Let me guess. You're a *John*."

"I've never met them, but I've seen them in concert with my parents. You're right, I like John. He's the intellectual of the band." As soon as I say it, I realize I sound like a snob, but Karen doesn't seem to notice.

"I saw them at the stadium last summer," she says. "I waited in line all night for tickets. They were \$5.75. My parents said that was too much, but they gave me the money anyway. My friends and I rushed the stage. It was so groovy!"

*

When I get home, Keith announces that we're going to a restaurant to celebrate our arrival in America.

"Celebrate?"

"Well, we've been here a few weeks and things seem to be working out well, don't you think?"

I just smile and say nothing.

We drive around a while and Felicity spots a place called The Palace whose sign boasts *Home Cooking at Family Prices*.

“This looks lovely,” she says as she pulls our used Chevrolet into the car park; I mean, parking lot.

The inside walls are covered in rose wallpaper like an American’s idea of an English tea room. We sit at a table covered with a plastic tablecloth that matches the wallpaper. Everything looks okay, but I can’t help but think something is going to go terribly wrong, when the waitress approaches us wearing a fake smile and staring at us like we’re from Mars.

“Do you have vegetarian dishes?” Felicity asks, studying the menu.

“Ma’am?”

“Meals that don’t have meat.”

“I have to check.” She disappears.

“Well, that was odd.”

“Maybe she didn’t understand your accent,” Keith says.

The waitress confers with the man behind the cash register. My brother and I look at each other and I know we’re thinking the same thing: we are not going to be served at this establishment. I can feel our different-ness, like we’re wearing white shoes after Labor Day. (Karen says this is some kind of rule in America. I don’t understand, but I guess she would know.)

The waitress returns with a man who’s smiling way too much for somebody who works in a restaurant covered in rose wallpaper and lace curtains.

“I’m Bill Dyson, the manager. Can I help you?”

“Yes,” Keith says, “we’d like to know if you have any vegetarian dishes. We don’t eat meat.”

“I’m sorry,” Dyson says.

Nobody says a word. Jeremy and I look at my parents and then at the waitress, who’s busy straightening her name tag. Bill Dyson doesn’t budge.

“Is there a problem?” Felicity asks.

“You’re that Edmund family from the newspaper. We don’t serve long-haired hippies who don’t believe in God.”

Keith and Felicity look at each other like they can’t believe they’re being rejected by a culture they’ve come to live amongst and study.

“Right, then,” Keith says as he motions for us to leave.

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The next day, after school, Karen and I go to her favorite pizza place. I feel relaxed for the first time since I arrived in the States. Karen is genuine. Real. I don’t have to worry about how I look or what I say. She’s smart, too. The other girls in school act a bit thick when they talk to boys.

“See, in junior high, boys don’t like smart girls,” she explains. “It’s different in high school, though, where boys are more interested in girls’ minds than the way they look. I can’t wait until high school.”

We sit in silence for a few minutes and I sneak a glance at her. Most people would say she’s *brainy*, because she wears glasses and doesn’t use makeup. But, when you look at her, you see that she’s actually pretty. I’m not saying I have a crush on her. It’s not like that.

In her notebook, Karen carries the newspaper article about my family: “Long-Haired Atheist Brits Invade Quiet Suburb,” which features a photo of a bearded Keith smoking a fag and Felicity in her Marianne Faithful haircut, looking like a folk singer.

“Your parents are so cool! I love that African blouse she’s wearing,” she says.

“It’s a *dashiki*. Felicity got it when we lived in Kenya.”

“You lived in Africa?”

“Yeah, but I was only six. I don’t remember much.”

“That’s so boss!”

Felicity and Keith don’t believe in hierarchies in the family. That’s why Jeremy and I call them by their first names instead of *Mum* and *Dad*. They live their values. They took us to Findhorn to learn how to grow organic vegetables and live communally. They participate in anti-war protests at the U.S. Embassy and they fight for the rights for native peoples. Sometimes, it’s like they’re one person instead of two. In one way, that’s great because I know they will never split up. But, it means I can’t work them over one at a time or play them off against each other because they’re of like mind.

But, for all their platitudes about how to live an examined life (they’re big Thoreau fans), the truth is, here in Ohio, they’re just different and that makes them freaks. And, being hassled by Mrs. Grimms has taught me one thing: in Ohio, *different* equals bad and nothing can change that. Not logic, not good deeds, not humility. And, not the fact that I study hard and keep my nose clean, like an All-American kid.

I remember something from my American History class last year. In early colonial America, undesirables were tar and feathered and run out of town on rails. I wonder whether that

tradition is still alive and whether anyone is planning to do that to my family. Karen's voice pulls me back into the moment.

"Carl, I think it's neat that your family is from England and you wear your hair long. That's so cool. Can't people see that?"

"Yeah, but being attacked in the school library isn't cool."

"I know. Teachers are either really great or totally crazy. In fourth grade, I had Mrs. Sponable. She used to stuff rags in boys' mouths and make them sit in front of the class on a stool when they were bad. Once, she made a boy sit inside the metal cabinet in the back of the room."

"Is she still teaching?"

"I think she's in a mental institution or something."

*

I'm sitting in English class on Friday when Mr. Stewart, the principal strides into class.

"I need the boys to line up here," he says, pointing to the wall covered with maps.

We line up and Mr. Stewart walks past like a general inspecting the troops. He stops in front of a couple of boys and peers at their heads. Then, he stops in front of me.

"You. What's your name?"

"Carl Edmunds."

"Well, Mr. Edmunds, your hair is the worst of the bunch. Now listen up, boys. The four of you need to get haircuts, he says as he points to the offenders. I expect you to return to school on Monday with more reasonable styles."

"Yes, sir," the other guys say in unison.

"Did you hear me, Edmunds? You didn't nod your head."

“Sir, I don’t want to cut my hair.”

The other kids stare at me.

“And, just why is that?”

“I don’t understand why I need to.”

“Because I told you to.” He turns to my teacher. “Mrs. Bryant, will you excuse Mr. Edmunds and I for a few moments?” He grabs my arm and pulls me toward the door.

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On Monday, I’m in the library again, staring at the clock on the wall. It’s the size of a ship’s porthole and it makes this clicking sound with each sweep of the second hand, ticking away the minutes until the bell rings and I can go to English class. I’m staring at the clock, in a trance, thinking about how I like being surrounded by books. I’m feeling pretty mellow and I’m chanting in my head. *Om Shanti Om*. At least, I think I’m chanting to myself, but apparently, I’m audible to Mrs. Grimms, who must have ears like dogs who hear sounds humans can’t.

“Are you talking to me, Boy?”

I stop chanting.

“So, you don’t believe in God, eh?”

Oh, balls. She’s seen the newspaper article. I want to tell her that America is supposed to be the land of freedom of religion. A lot of Brits are atheists. It’s not a big deal. But, then I remember she’s crazy, so I say nothing.

I’m pulled out of my musings as Mrs. Grimms, who looks like a mountain lion about to rip open a deer, grabs my shirt and pulls me to her face. This time, I look her in the eye and I don’t blink. The pores on her face are moon craters and she’s got kind of a mustache. I stand up straight, still looking into her eyes. After half a minute, she pushes me back down into my chair.

The stand-off is over. I can relax, so I continue my passive resistance, drawing myself in and meditating. I guess she thinks I'm ignoring her, which of course, I am, because she pounds her fist on the table. By now, students who were staring put their heads down and go back to their reading, like in those American Western movies where the crowd dives behind the bar when the bad guy enters through the swinging doors.

Until now, I haven't defended myself. Mostly I've just sat there and let Mrs. Grimms pull my hair, yell in my ear, and call me everything from *godless vermin* to *Pinko Commie coward*.

For some reason "All You Need is Love" is running through my head: "*Nowhere you can be that isn't where you're meant to be, It's easy . . .*" I try to take solace in the words, bury myself in the song.

I'm getting my English composition book out of my bag when she lunges at me with a pair of library scissors that look like the pruning shears our gardener uses back home. I spot Karen a few tables away and fear she may be about to witness a murder. People like my parents will study this phenomenon and write dissertations about it. They'll name it *Scholasticide*.

Karen buries her head in her book as the tirade continues. She looks up just as Mrs. Grimms pulls me out of my chair by my hair.

"You need a haircut, long-hair!" She whacks off a hunk of my hair. She's like a three-year-old who's gotten a hold of his Mum's sewing scissors. "I'll teach you to believe in God!" she cackles like the wicked witch in *The Wizard of Oz*. Nutter. I just sit there and act like I don't care, but the truth is, I can't believe this is happening. I'm in some kind of time warp.

She lunges again and I realize she intends to cut off all my hair. She's swinging the scissors around and the next thing I know, I stand up and grab them. Then I do something I would never do: I shove an adult. Not much, mind you, just a bit, but it's a push just the same.

“Leave me alone, you cow! You’re mental!”

She trips over her own feet and falls, right on her bum. I feel kind of bad for her. I mean, when you’re an adult, you’ve got your pride. And, it looks bad to fall down, especially in a roomful of kids. I didn’t mean to make her fall, but I had no choice. I couldn’t let her cut off my hair.

The library goes quiet, so quiet, I swear I can hear the fish swimming in the aquarium. I rub my scalp as the bell rings and head for the door. Karen follows.

“You want me to go to the Principal’s office and report what I saw?”

I feel like I’m going to cry. “Naw, it wouldn’t do any good. I doubt anyone would listen to a student defending a long-haired British vegetarian atheist.”

*

That night I eat dinner alone with Keith (bean burgers and beet salad). Felicity is at a faculty meeting and my brother is at baseball practice.

“Your hair.”

“Yeah?”

“What happened?”

“The school librarian thought I needed a trim.”

“And you let her?”

“Just doing what you taught me. Passive resistance.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to be a doormat.”

“Well, actually, I fought back. You’ll probably be getting a call from the school. I pushed a librarian.”

“Okay, we are going down to that school.”

“But, the school officials--”

“--Idiots.”

“Idiots with power. Look, a few students tell me they think my hair’s cool but most of them talk behind my back, call me *weirdo* and say I look like a girl. And, the student council president says ‘rules are rules’ and agrees with the principal.”

“It’s a popularity contest. Just how do you think these student council kids get elected?”

“We’re hippies and I’m a juvenile delinquent.”

“You’re a good student who doesn’t cause trouble. They just want you to conform.”

“Nobody cares about your theories, Dad. Everybody hates us here.”

“Keith.”

“In America, kids don’t call their parents by their first names.”

“Well, we do. And where are your clothes?”

“They went missing during gym class while I was showering and I was forced to walk to the school office wrapped in dirty towels.”

“You should have called me.”

“They gave me these old clothes from the lost and found box. I was going to tell you I traded my clothes to a poor kid. I knew you’d love hearing that because it would show charity. Except, I’m not feeling particularly charitable today.”

Keith closes his eyes, trying to process the information. Sometimes I wish my parents didn’t have a combined IQ of 300. Why couldn’t they be more like other people, or, at least if they had to be different, couldn’t they just not let on and not tell anybody? Let people assume they were Christian, that they ate meat. They could cut their hair, take lessons to get rid of their accents, and fit in.

But, it's too late for that. I'm beginning to think moving to America is an experiment gone awry. Felicity and Keith had approached it like anthropologists, but for me, there's no professional detachment, no participant-observer status to grab onto and I'm in the thick of it.

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The next day Keith and I meet with the principal.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Edmunds. There's nothing I can do."

"Now, you listen to me. I will sue you and the entire school system unless you offer an apology to my son and make sure that woman never comes near him again."

"No can do. Your son used profanity with one of our staff and instigated a near-riot in the library. I won't have it in my school."

"I imagine you have witnesses to this alleged incident?"

"Don't have to. It's the librarian's word against his. Mr. Edmunds, this is a discipline issue. Your son's hair is distracting and disruptive to the classroom learning environment. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have paperwork to do."

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The Board of Education has got me. I'm in trouble for not attending school. I'm not attending school because I was suspended. I was suspended for refusing to cut my hair. Since I wasn't attending school, I was violating state law, so I was sent to Juvenile Court.

"Do you understand why you're here, young man?" the Juvenile Court judge asks me. "Since you refuse to cooperate with your school officials, I have no choice but to remand you to Juvenile Detention for a psychiatric investigation as to why you will not conform to the school's rules and return to class. You are truant because you are not attending school."

"I'm not attending school because I was suspended."

“Yes, that is correct. You were suspended because you refuse to cut your hair as ordered by your school principal.”

I think it would be cool to be a lawyer and protect people’s rights, so I have a go. “Your Honor, everyone talks about the possibility that my long hair could somehow disrupt school. But, there’s no evidence nor proof that students with long hair disrupt school. By suspending me from attending school, I have been denied a right to receive an education. How can they deny me that based solely on the way I look? Isn’t it just possible that the principal at my school personally doesn’t like long hair and that I’m a scapegoat?”

“Young man, that is a well-thought out argument, but unfortunately an incorrect one. You will be sent to a Juvenile Detention Center for secure confinement for one night as a status offender, pending a psychiatric investigation and a decision on your case. You will be held for 24 hours.”

“This is insane!” Keith yells.

So, I was to be banged up, locked up in Juvy like a criminal. The whole night, “Purple Haze” runs through my head. Maybe they won’t let me out and I’ll be here forever. The other kids in the cell look like murderers and thieves. In the middle of the night, I wake up crying. I’m afraid someone will hear, so I stuff my fist in my mouth and try to get back to sleep. Just another in a litany of scholastic humiliations that began with *Fag Brits Go Home* scrawled on my locker and likely ends with permanent incarceration.

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The psychiatric interview the next morning is bonkers. Keith and Felicity hire a lawyer, who tells me how to answer and what to say. I feel like a ping pong ball bouncing back and forth. The psychiatrist keeps asking me why I was suspended and how I feel about it. He talks to me

like I'm retarded. Then, he asks me why it's so important to me not to cut my hair. He asks a lot of questions like: am I on drugs, am I angry, do I ever have thoughts about killing my teachers or harming myself. The lawyer keeps stopping the psychiatrist and talking with me and Keith, and then it's over. I guess they decide I'm not crazy, because they let me go. But, it doesn't end there.

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"Keith, I cannot sleep. People drive past the house day and night, and the phone never stops ringing. It's an invasion of privacy," Felicity says. "Maybe I should just go back to England. Carl, I am so sorry this is happening to you," she says, hugging me.

"It's not your fault. Maybe I should just cut my hair."

"Absolutely not. You can't back down now. Keith and I support you one hundred percent.

"Son, Felicity and I have decided, on advice of our lawyer, that the best thing to do is to file an appeal to the Court of Appeals about your suspension and truancy charge. How does that sound?"

"Okay, I guess. Do you think it will help?"

"That's not the issue. We have to fight this. It's about what's right," Keith says.

So, we fight it. Keith files lots of paperwork and meets with the lawyer. Meanwhile, the harassing phone calls continue and I've stopped going to the library during study hall. Karen stands by me, but no one else talks to me. I dive into my coursework. I read a lot. I sleep a lot.

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The delinquency charge was reversed. The court says since we weren't given written notice under the Ohio Revised Code stating that I was truant from school, I was denied due

process of law. But, the hair issue isn't settled. Keith takes my case to a lower court but loses. He wants to take it to the Ohio Supreme Court, but we're out of money and Felicity's nerves are shot. And, it's likely just a matter of time before I'm suspended again for refusing to cut my hair.

If I stay here in the States, this could mess up my future. I mean, people keep talking to me about my permanent record, whatever that is. I hear that a lot from other students and teachers use it as a discipline method. There are all kinds of things here that can mess you up. But, it really doesn't matter now, because we're going back to England.

Keith and Felicity try to sell the house, but nobody comes to look at it. It's in foreclosure because we can't make the mortgage payments. The lawyer's fees have eaten Keith and Felicity's savings. And, while the university said it would support them and fight for them, when push came to shove, it refused to get involved and sent each of them a letter "releasing you from the obligation of fulfilling the duties of your appointment." Keith and Felicity would have fought it, but that would have meant paying more lawyers and besides, as Keith said, "There's no point in staying somewhere where you're not wanted."

So, the Edmunds family – long-haired hippies, Godless, vegetable-eating foreigners – leaves the Land of Liberty, bugged by a country that prides itself on protecting civil liberties. I feel bad for Keith and Felicity, but I can't wait to see my friends and Gran again and play my drums. Felicity and Keith borrow money from Gran for our plane fare, because they're skint.

Karen and I hang out before I leave. We stay up late and talk about a lot of things—poetry, philosophy, life. We exchange addresses and promise to keep in touch. I invite her to visit me in London.

*

We're on the plane now, suspended somewhere over the Atlantic. When we boarded, an angry yet giddy mob bade us good riddance. Karen was there to see me off. She gave me a hug and said, "Carl, as far as I'm concerned, you leaving America means the British Invasion is officially over." As the plane pulled away from the gate, I could still see her in the waiting area window, waving like crazy.

*

A few days before we leave, Jeremy and I help Felicity and Keith clear out their offices. As we drive away from campus, I spot some graffiti on the wall of the student union. It says, *GOD IS DEAD*. I brush my hair from my eyes and think *No Shit*.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I was inspired to write 'God is Dead' by several things. First, I am interested in all things 60's and I'd heard there were teenagers who were discriminated against for wearing their hair long at that time. I did find an article in a Cleveland newspaper about a family from England whose son had long hair and suffered problems in school because of it. It got me wondering about whether 50 years later, in today's climate of xenophobia, we're doing any better in the way we treat those who are different from us. My intention was to show this through a teenager's perspective and the consequences of discrimination and intolerance when taken to an extreme. I live in a multi-cultural neighborhood in Brooklyn where I have daily contact with immigrants and I couldn't imagine living somewhere where I couldn't experience that.*

BIO: Debbie L. Miller is a Brooklyn, New York writer, who writes plays, monologues, short stories, flash fiction, essays and humor. She won the 2017 Mona Schreiber Prize for Humorous Fiction and Nonfiction and has been published in *Alaska Women Speak*, *The Diagram.com*, *fiftywordstories.com*, *the fable.com* and *The Reproductive Rights Festival Anthology*. You can read more at DebbieLMiller.com