

“Fenstad’s Mother”
by Charles Baxter

Rosellen Brown

Charles Baxter’s “Fenstad’s Mother” has all the earmarks of its author’s easy-going style: it is beguiling in its light-footed and non-judgmental way with serious subjects, and dead-on accurate in its understanding of the contradictory and contrarian.

The first paragraph lays out a family dichotomy succinctly, in a neutral third person. Although Fenstad and his aged mother are very different, from the first we see them trying for a respectful relationship. For one thing, though Fenstad is a churchgoer, his mother is “a lifelong social progressive. . . . She had spent her life in the company of rebels and deviationists.” She is an unrepentant critic of things—many things—as they are; even the smell of her apartment, which “smelled of soap and Lysol,” hints of “an old woman who wouldn’t tolerate nonsense.” Fenstad’s effortful goodness, she clearly believes, is suspect.

Oddly and endearingly, though she denies individuality and declares all problems to be political at bottom, of the two of them she is the one people flock to, the one whose respect they can intuit. For all his religious earnestness, Fenstad is “rigid” and distant, and he is bewildered that others “recognized something in his mother that he himself had never been able to see.” But he is a dutiful son and he keeps a worried eye on her, looking and listening for signs that she’s failing.

One evening, for a diversion, he invites her to an English class he teaches at the local college. There, and on a subsequent visit, amidst a roomful of adults—sensible, practical, stubbornly unliterary—she charms his students far more than he does. As far as Clara Fenstad is concerned, the whole enterprise is suspect: “She is angry with him for collaborating with grammar. She would

call it unconsciously installed authority,” and so, though the entire story is technically his, we see the evening through her benignly critical eyes. No one can do this kind of scene better than Baxter: what Fenstad regards as the class’s obtuseness and lack of sophistication as they evade his intention to instruct them in formal logic is very funny, but it is not patronizing. As they bring forward their own examples of real-life logic, they aren’t seen as failing; it’s Fenstad who can’t connect, and his mother knows it. “In [her] face for a split second was the history of her compassionate, ambivalent attention to him.”

When, after class, they go out for a restorative cup of tea, the story turns darker. They are accosted by a homeless woman, who looked “desperate, percolating with insanity . . . the essence of wretchedness.” (Such representatives of guilt-provoking neediness are a preoccupation of Baxter’s; he has used this kind of encounter in other work.) While her son fumes and runs the woman off with a handful of money and a promise to pray for her, his mother literally tries to give her the coat off her back. Though this may sound schematic—what better way to drive home the difference between abstract and concrete virtue?—in fact it’s an example of what writing teachers mean by “scene” in its most effective sense: we see, enacted, how the conventional Fenstad, for whom religion and money are the default solutions to problems, is less humane than his theory-loving but perennially hopeful mother. But Baxter never quite stacks the deck: at the same time, of course, Fenstad is right to be alarmed; it is winter in Minnesota and his mother’s enthusiastic charity is not only sentimental, it is also dangerous.

Everything his mother does shows her to be wholly alive to her surroundings, no matter the consequences. He discovers her sitting on a bench watching him and his girlfriend ice-skating. (Not a man without imagination, and not without his sorrows, early on he has given his blessing to the act of skating: “To express grief on skates seemed almost impossible, and Fenstad liked that.”) In lieu of any detailed backstory, all we learn is that after many years of fruitless hope he and his ex-wife will reconcile. Watching him and his girlfriend skating in harmony, his mother at last seems ready to surrender to his obvious happiness. But, not surprisingly, she ends the evening chilled, and Fenstad and his girlfriend must take her home and administer a warm bath: she is, if not in spirit, unavoidably old and frail.

And finally—each scene as clearly separated as the scenes of a play—as she lies recovering in bed from the bronchitis that follows her outing on that bench, we see her in tight communion with the one sophisticated radical she met in Fenstad’s class. A black man and a reader of Bakunin and *Workers’ Vanguard*, he has brought her some tapes of Art Tatum and Oscar Peterson

and is embarking with her on a new journey of discovery: “Next week he’s going to try something more progressive on me!” The sight of them together, listening to the kind of music we suspect Fenstad wouldn’t much like, acts as yet another gentle rebuke. He is bemused, as usual, by his mother’s capacity to draw people in, and perhaps even a little envious that she is off to a place where he can’t follow her. ““What glimpses!’ she said at last,” like a young girl meeting the new world.

Baxter’s story, in which Clara Fenstad speaks up on behalf of dialectics, is itself dialectical, full of contrasts: Fenstad’s isolation, his mother’s inclusiveness; the Minnesota cold and darkness vs. the interior warmth and light; the stiffness of Fenstad’s instructions to his students vs. the playfulness of his mother, who even ends up waltzing with a student by way of demonstration. Baxter’s tone of dispassionate, never mocking, irony binds the contrasts, favoring neither character (though we know which one we like better), and, voice too measured to be didactic, shows the separation between mother and son to be deep, unbridgeable, but not fatal to their affection.

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