

IN A FISH

by

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*I do believe; help me in my unbelief.*

—Mark 9:24

## *Introduction*

Growing up, we ask a lot of questions. We ask why a lot. We ask how things work. Then we get a little older; we stop asking. We have a few answers, but they feel like plenty. We can blame it on a false sense of maturity, or a loss of childlike curiosity.

I blame it on being a Christian.

In church, I was too often given black and white answers. God was no mystery, the Bible was clear-cut, and my life had one path. I was to believe the Bible was absolute truth, accept Christ into my heart, and spend my time on Earth being good and knowing everything. I was supposed to be convinced I was right.

The problem with living in a black and white world, however, is that you end up missing a lot of beautiful colors.

When I got to college, my convictions fell away. I remained a Christian, and even spent my summers working for churches. But doubts crept in and shook my faith. I felt like I had been picked up and turned upside down by the school bully so that he could empty

my pockets of lunch money. My beliefs fell to the floor, and were taken before I could retrieve them.

But this is not a story about losing faith and never finding it again. This is a story about finding faith amidst doubt. This is a story about asking questions instead of giving false answers. This is a story of gray and blue and red, with only hints of black and white. It's a story about God, and it's a story about demons. It's about some people that lived a really long time ago, and it's about a boy living right now. It's autobiographical and it's fiction. Sacred and profane. There is pain, and there is growth. There is laughter, and there is crying. It's about Heaven and Earth, blessings and curses, God's presence and absence, life and death.

Growing up, but learning to ask those childlike questions again. They feel heavier now, but they are easier to hold when I don't expect answers to come falling from the sky.

I fought hard for the faith I have now. It wasn't spoon-fed to me while I sat in a pew at church and accepted everything handed to me. It wasn't cut out for me from a cookie sheet to look like the faith of other Christians. It wasn't given to me by an easy life with no difficulties and no surprises. No, the faith I have now is my own, lost by me and lived by me. I found it in the place I least expected it to be, in that mysterious presence I call God, the one I can never understand but always wonder at.

In the Bible, Jonah ended up in a fish because he fell away from God, but the fish was also God's way of saving him. Jonah had no idea where that fish was headed, but, in that fish, he had a meaningful conversation with God. Jonah had a hard time understanding God, agreeing with God, and not running away from God, but hearing his prayer in that fish

makes me feel like Jonah had a good friendship with God. Full of trials, sure, but there's a beauty in the struggle to engage with God.

There's beauty in living every color but black and white.

God, I am still trying to figure you out.

Don't let me.

*I'll spare you my goodbyes  
The truth belongs to God  
The mistakes were mine*

—mewithoutYou

## *Breaking Up with God*

### I. The End

You come in waves.

I broke up with God when I was 19 years old. I don't remember doing it. There was no D-day, no bright red X on the calendar standing out amidst the other late nights and droll days. We didn't fight for weeks in a dramatic buildup to the fallout, or quietly end it on the other line of a phone before disconnecting. It was more like misplacing the needle on the record, in the middle of a song far too scratched to understand. Or perhaps it was like placing the needle near the end of a song that only fades, with no closure, no real ending, just the gradual turning down of the volume over time. I half-expected another song, unaware that any finality had been reached, but the record ended. The needle scratched for a few seconds, clawing for a finale, but there was none to be found and no B-side to turn to.

We've all had those breakups. No one exactly articulates what is taking place, or what is not taking place. Both parties just begin to assume that their song has started fading after 17 missed phone calls, 49 unanswered texts, a missed plan every night, and the

lights suddenly going out in the apartment when one party shows up unannounced. Nobody pretends that closure is a sacrament that people need. It's a clean break, and it may be the best one. No fights led to this moment, no blood to be found or bruises to be soothed. The relationship just fades into nothingness. Kind of like people.

So that's what I did to God when I was 19. I let him fade. I let him fade until I was 20, a slow burn in the sincere, misguided hope that he wouldn't notice. When I realized he was gone, I forgot that I had wanted him to go, and wondered where he went. I had not confronted God, not given him the "we both know this is going nowhere" talk. I never put his possessions in a box by the door when he left for work. I just started locking the door when he left, so that when he came home he eventually got the hint. Then I stopped calling as much. Then I stopped altogether.

Stopped trying.

Stopped caring.

Stopped.

We live for the start and stop. Routine in chaos. Structure is for the naïve, the hopeless romantics that believe in continuity, in good things not ending. What life really is, when we cease to cling to old ideas of love, is adapting, changing, and fitting things to our needs. Survival of the fittest. Letting go, not letting God.

God is not a good planner. We never kept a steady calendar because he would always go and change my plans, so I would have to throw out the calendar I had already filled and start a new one. He wanted a calendar he could alter at his own whim. I know this because he put a magnet on our fridge that said, "Life is what happens when you least expect it." I hate fridges with advice.

What God wanted was a self-thrown parade on the calendar. He wanted me to write his name down on January 1, and then draw a long, red, ominous arrow marching its way to December 31. Egomaniac that he is, he didn't want to make plans; he wanted to *be* the plan. And I just can't commit to that. There is negotiation, and there is suffering. So instead, I scribbled a 'G' on January 1, and then an 'O' on each day after. God thought it was clever, expecting me to complete the year's schedule with a 'D' on December 31. But somewhere along the way, I forgot how to spell his name. Then the calendar only spelled a very long-winded instruction: "Go." Months passed before I understood which of us the calendar was addressing.

I need my plans, the things I want to do. God is free to come along but he can't ask for more than he's given. An invitation to live in my apartment is not the same as an invitation to redecorate. He can join me, but have some courtesy, God. Be grateful. You're not indebted to me, but remember who's paying the rent. Knock and the door shall be open unto you; change the drapes and you can leave.

You are a wave drifting back out to sea, and I am barely lifting my hand to wave goodbye.

## II. The Beginning

When a relationship ends, the sad parts are the easiest to remember. Searching for the good memories becomes a burden, and finding them makes me forget why I wanted to rediscover things I meant to lose. I'll read old love letters and forget the meaning, confused at how I ever understood the words that look like foreign languages. God was speaking in tongues and falling in love; I was losing the beat of the drum.

We were in love once, but those days drift in and out like a song I haven't heard in years. The words no longer hold the same meaning, and the instruments no longer seem to match up like they once did. Were we missing the harmony? Was there any to find?

We met at summer camp. Everybody was in love with God at summer camp, but youth is filled with crushes. They come and go, then we get old. I thought maybe I was different. I thought I knew what he really meant when he said things, what he really meant when he didn't say anything. We could talk for hours, or we could not say a word. It was enough to bask in his presence. He would tell me stories of centuries past, and I knew they were true because I felt like I had been there. In the mouth of a lion, the belly of a fish, the end of a promise, and a redeeming wish. God's memories felt like my own, and in all of them I found myself saved by the only one I could ever call my hero. I felt the curtain lifting from my heart to reveal the one who had been there all along. He was written there from the start, waiting for my ears to hear and my eyes to see.

When the summer ended, those feelings remained. After camp I wrote letters to him. I told him how I wished he was there with me, how I talked about him to all of my friends. I told him that school was about to start, but I wouldn't stop writing. I wouldn't stop fighting for the one who fought for me first.

Then school started. We lost touch.

But every summer we'd meet back at that camp and reignite those feelings with the warm sun on our necks and the smell of handpicked lilies. I wondered how to stay in this season forever, how a person keeps two hearts steady in their lifetime. He asked about college, and we decided to go together. We loaded everything into his pick-up and made the

long journey across the states to California, where he said it would always be sunny and the weather would always be perfect.

*Perfect.* A word I forgot how to pronounce.

I find it easier to relay the facts than the feelings. It's hard to say yes, I thought we would last. Harder to say yes, I was in love. Before God, I had no notion of love. I was an outsider looking in on something that I did not comprehend. Love is not logical. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not self-seeking. Love cannot be written down, or traced or explained or understood. It can be uttered in a verse or a line or a song, but it can never be felt like it was when first written. Love is patient, but does not wait. Love knows hate, but only as God knows Satan. Love is a perfect creation, until the band forgets how to play and the cymbals just clang. It can be brought back together, but only by grace. And love and grace are two things a person can search for, an inch away from them, and yet they seek without finding until the end of life.

Yet God came along. My heart burst open in the shape of spring's first rose, blooming in vibrant reds that could not be contained within my chest.

Looking back, it was probably shaped like a cartoon explosion.

But I believed. I did not understand love, but I knew it. And its name was God.

Saying that now, those words once so sweet like what he whispered in my ear, the taste has changed. It feels bitter, forced, contrived. I stare at the letters I wrote back to God like someone else wrote them, as if my heart would never tell my brain to tell my fingers to write them. As if I was someone else entirely, someone unrecognizable, someone far better than I could ever be. Who was that? I can't get that person back.

But everywhere I look I can't get God out of my mind. He is in the movies I have seen, the songs that we sang, the colors of the earth, the pictures on the wall, the people that I hate, the blood in my veins. He is me and I am him and I will never be the same. With or without him. To have and to hold, too far or too close. For richer, much poorer. In sickness, in hell. For better or far worse. Until death do we meet?

You are the waves coming to wrap me up and take me away. I am running for shelter even though I won't find it.

### III. The Middle

I always run. That's what he said. No matter where I am, I am looking for the escape route, afraid of the day that I won't find one. Afraid that the very exits that let me out will lead me right back in. Afraid of the day when exits become entrances. I would cheat on him, but he'd forgive. I would lie to him, but he'd stay honest. I would try to leave this world, but he'd put me back on it.

But somehow, I escaped him. And I turn around and look back all the time. I went back to the places I escaped and I searched endlessly for the way back in. The reverse escape route. The thing I feared but now spend my life pining for. I can't find it. It's as if all the doors I exited had no entrance, as if the doors that let me out didn't exist in the first place.

Where are you?

I left God standing there. But when I come back to where I abandoned God, is he the one abandoning me? Or was he ever there to begin with? And how do I find him again? You said if I ever came back, you'd be waiting. But you aren't. Or am I looking?

I looked in all of our old places, at those camps, in friend's faces. I looked in new places, in trials, in phases. Not a trace. If I could dig through the lies I told and the things I stole maybe a single ray of sunlight could help me claw my way through. I always found God in all the wrong places and now I can't find him at all. I start to wonder if I ever even had him, or if I was creating him out of something less. Something worldly. Something trite.

I wrote to him, called him, spent time with him, did everything I thought I should do and nothing at all. Maybe it wasn't about what I did. Or maybe it was that for every bit of good I did for God, I was always covering it in mud. Taking one step towards him, and still I fall behind. Or maybe there wasn't one bit of good I did, I just expected everything from God and promised nothing in return. What I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.

Thinking back to the breakup, I wondered if it was even possible to separate from God. The promises he made became like threats, telling me that nothing I could do could make him love me less, telling me that nothing would separate me from his love. I wanted out. I felt suffocated by him surrounding me. His arms felt like an ever-tightening grip I did everything to break out of. But now the space I wanted chokes me. The emptiness and loneliness I longed for are a tighter grip, forcing me underground into a grave I swore to God I would never make my home.

Where is home? Where is God? Are they the same?

Now, at the age of 21, I don't hate God anymore. I know I was angry, but I was wrong and more than a little misguided. If he came back, I hope I wouldn't run again. I don't know if I could take him back, I know I'm not worthy, but maybe that wasn't the point. Maybe he knew that things would be like that, maybe that's why he only loved me more when I least deserved it.

Maybe that's why I'd rather date Pride, and never accept charity.

Maybe that's why he called it grace and not charity.

Maybe that's why I don't understand.

Maybe that's why I'll never understand.

Maybe that's why I can never love you like you love me.

I come in waves.

You stay the same.

We have to break up.

*Please come back.*

*Remember we used to speak  
Now I'm starting to think  
Your voice was really my own  
Bouncing off the ceiling back to me*

—As Cities Burn

### *In a Fish*

The older I get, the less I believe in.

I was taught in Sunday school that crafts were a good way to learn about God. I could make a boat with a paper plate folded in half, a triangle die-cut attached to a Popsicle stick for the sail, and a memory verse scrawled on the side of the boat in purple crayon. In this way, I would show my knowledge and appreciation for what God gives us, such as safety in hard times. From an early age, I was told that a poorly-glued craft was enough to understand God. But as the years went on, I became the wiser, though I often long for the return of those days in the safety of a paper plate boat.

While crafts might be excellent ways for children to learn about God, I can't get those days back. I'm no longer sure if there is a good way to grasp the mysteries of God, or if there is a right way to thank him for blessings. I was disappointed when I realized that I can't throw God a surprise party. Not for his birthday, not to say thank you, not for anything. Any appreciative gesture I might make can't be kept from him, so it's pointless to

sneak around for months, carefully inviting the apostles and prophets and other coworkers to God's favorite restaurant. It'd be best to let him pick out his own gifts.

There is an awful emptiness that overtakes me knowing that I can't spring a weekend getaway on God for the anniversary of my baptism. I can't compile a scrapbook of memories from church camp and spiritual journeys and say, "Look God, I've been making this behind your back all this time." He's all-knowing, so even if he feigned surprise I'd see right through it.

"I got you this," I mumble. I hand God a bandana I wore at camp for three summers straight. The massive sweat stain shows that I went to the service camps rather than the fun ones. God should like this.

"Thanks," God says, holding the bandana away from him, loving his children but hating their uncanny ability to stain everything with sweat and dirt. God thinks, "If he had just gone to one of the fun camps, he could've given me a t-shirt, and I could've stretched it out later."

I nervously ask, "Are you surprised?"

"Not really." God shuffles his feet nervously. He does his best to be nice, but is cursed by his inability to lie, or at least feign surprise.

"Oh." I shuffle my feet.

"Are you disappointed?"

"No more than usual."

I fell away from childhood beliefs of perfect scenes with God, and I'm in the middle of trying out new ones. My notions of infinity peeled away, scales falling away to reveal a thicker, more cynical skin. It could have been when I realized that prayers for people in car

wrecks were useless if God decided it was time for those people to leave. It could have been when some of my atheist friends were far nicer than some of my Christian friends. It could have been when I found some of Paul's words to be arrogant and contradictory to what I think I know about Jesus. However it happened, those candy-coated beliefs about God are gone.

I still believe the Bible is the inspired word of God, but in a different way. I think that the writers of the Bible were all human beings conveying what they knew and felt about God to the best of their ability. As I've learned, however, the best of human ability always falls short. Paul spends a lot of time building up the Apocalypse in his letters, convinced that Jesus will return in a matter of weeks, before many of the people he's writing to will die. Paul was obviously wrong, and it made me wonder what else he or other writers were wrong about.

I haven't stopped believing in God or let every conviction fall through the cracks; I've just stopped understanding how God works, or stopped pretending to. If I was forced to define where I stand, maybe if I was held at gunpoint by a hellfire-and-brimstone pastor hell-bent on getting some solid answers, I wouldn't be ready to commit to anything.

"Well, what'll it be? God or not God?" Reverend Hellfire loads the bullets into his gun, as if the question is merely casual conversation. I would not mention the irony of the gun in a pastor's hand, because in all likelihood the gun would be disguised as a Bible, or a political position, or anti-gay speech.

"It's more complicated than that, I think." I'm not sure of myself, and Reverend Hellfire smells it. I'm looking around a dim room to find some clue to tell me where I am. I notice a glimmer in front of me, and I realize we're by the baptistery in his rundown

church. I'm strapped to an old pew sitting on the edge of the murky water.

"But is it? It's a yes or no, black or white," he says, gun loaded and swinging loosely in his hand.

"We live in g-g-grey areas," I stammer. Reverend Hellfire aims the gun at my mouth, about to make a martyr of someone not standing for anything.

"Christians don't!" he spews. "Christians live in the white area, on the side of truth and faith and unceasing hope!" His signature bark has emerged. I have no doubt his bite is worse, as I've seen what vocal evangelists in the media can do to the Christian label.

I spit back, "Only because we're the worst at admitting we live in gray areas!"

"Don't drag us down with you!" Reverend Hellfire fumes, ready to take my life instead of saving it. "If you're falling away, we can take care of that."

"I'm not falling away!" I plead, trying to convince both the reverend and myself. "I'm just sitting down," I mumble. "I haven't given up; I'm just not quite sure how to proceed."

As Reverend Hellfire puts the gun to my temple and prepares to baptize me by firearm, I pray to God, wondering which side of the gun God is on. If he really is with the pastor, I'm not sure I want to be with God anymore. If he's with me though, this gunshot might hurt Reverend Hellfire worse than me. I had no hand in writing the Bible, but I'm deeply wounded by those who misuse it. How hard it must be for the one who inspired the book.

But maybe Reverend Hellfire misfires, and I have time to pull out my own gun, and we find ourselves in a standoff. I can't say whether my gun is loaded, since I don't know what I'm fighting for. Maybe I have a bullet for capitalism, a bullet for war, a bullet for those who claim to know everything. But the trigger won't pull if the gunman hesitates. I would

rather God intercede for me, but I have no idea when God will show up. There is an age when you realize you don't have to fold your hands to pray; there is an age when you wonder if God even hears.

I do believe that God is listening. It's just that prayers can be so quiet they almost don't exist. I've seen this at funerals many times, mouths opening at the podium to ask God for faith in a difficult moment, when what they really want is to have the person they're mourning back. But instead of asking for either, they stand with their mouths open, tears dripping into their parted lips to offer inspiration, but no words offering assistance. Given the amount of prayers God hears a day, it will be difficult for him to hear the ones that aren't being said.

Even if God is listening to prayers that aren't being said, I tend to project my desired answer onto him before he has a chance to speak. I used to pray for good grades on tests I didn't study for. I also prayed for relationships to work out, even when I could tell God was nowhere near the relationship. I felt bad after saying "amen" in these prayers, but I felt better knowing the Bible is filled with people praying for things to go their way.

There's a story in Judges, one of the worst books to read when I am doubting the human race, where a man named Jephthah goes to war to save his people. He tries to barter with God, exchanging a win against the Ammonites for a sacrifice. Jephthah promises to sacrifice whatever comes out of his front door to greet him when he returns home from the victory. Animals were kept on the first floor of the house, so Jephthah thinks he'll lose a sheep or a goat. Wrong. His daughter greets him, and he's naturally upset, but not so upset that he won't go through with the sacrifice. No, he's made a deal with God and he has to go on with it so God won't feel cheated.

Or so Jephthah thinks. Throughout this story, God doesn't say a word. God doesn't agree to the deal, and God doesn't force Jephthah to make the sacrifice. God doesn't say, "Hey, way to follow through, man. Next time maybe you'll specify a sheep. I have a lot of prayers to go through and can't just assume what everyone really means." The author just says that God delivers the Ammonites into Jephthah's hands, but how does he know God is actually involved? Jephthah could just think God is with him, giving him the adrenaline needed to beat the Ammonites. Who's to say God was there at all?

And I'm just like Jephthah. I pretend I am talking to God, but most of the time I am talking at him. God becomes a puppet that says what I want when I want. I never actually wait for an answer from the real God; I just keep moving the mouth on my sock puppet God. Which means my conversations with God are actually monologues, and I can't blame God for that. If I were to humble myself enough to have a real conversation with God, who's to say God will say anything?

"God, I need you to give me a sign."

"..."

"Should I take the job? I don't expect you to talk, just give a clear sign in the form of a three-legged dog or a snowstorm right here in Texas in July."

"..."

"What if I at least quit the job I have now? I hate it. Is that a sign from you, that I hate it?"

"..."

"The weatherman says 30% chance of rain today. If it doesn't rain, I'm going to take that as an affirmative response to quitting."

“ ... ”

“Okay. Good talk. Amen.”

“ ... ”

I prod God along with a stick, like a bully would poke at an anthill, expecting him to react and encourage erratic behavior. And sure, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, but the angel stops him. Perhaps people are allowed to be halfway crazy, as long as they're 100% sure they hear God correctly when he says to do something. That means I can't be checking emails while I'm praying, or watching TV, or making a sandwich. Maybe this is why we fold our hands to pray when we're kids—so we aren't distracted.

Then again, folded hands don't imply undivided attention. I've done most of my not listening to people with arms crossed, eyes looking past them to something less chatty, something that doesn't require me to sacrifice anything. I have a friend who likes to catch up with me once a month, but she mostly talks about herself, so I don't feel obligated to listen. The key is in nodding my head and repeating “Mhm” every few seconds. It's an art I'm still perfecting.

“I just want someone who treats me right,” she concludes, after an hour of telling me about her misfortunes in romance.

“Mhm.” The first one is always convincing. It has to express genuine interest so later, less meaningful ones can slip through unnoticed.

“I mean, is it so much to ask for someone who actually wants to hear about my day?”

“Mhm.”

She persists, “I don't think I should have to waste any more time on guys that...” She doesn't trail off here, but my attention fades.

“Mhm.”

“...” She’s very animated, I think.

“Mhm.” She seems glad I agree.

“...” She’s crying. I missed something. Do I make her backtrack? No.

That’s insensitive.

It might be a fear of committing to anything other than ourselves that leads us to these bad habits. I am ashamed to have friendships like these, where I work hard at the relationship until it stops benefiting me. I forget about sacrificing for the ones I love, and turn to compromising for the one I love more—me.

Jacob probably knows a thing or two about that. In Genesis, he loves Rachel, and promises her dad Laban that he’ll work for seven whole years in order to marry her. Jacob does it, and the Bible says that it only feels like a few days to Jacob because he is so in love with her. It would be very beautiful, if it weren’t for the next part.

After Jacob works to get the girl of his dreams, Laban tricks him and sends Jacob to bed with his other daughter Leah. Jacob lays with Leah, because it’s dark and he apparently doesn’t love Rachel as much as he thinks, or at least not enough to recognize who she isn’t in the dark. But maybe he loves her a little, because he works another seven years to marry Rachel. A week after marrying Leah, Jacob marries Rachel, but stays married to Leah, and continues to sleep with her, along with Rachel, along with Leah’s servant, along with Rachel’s servant. The whole part about seven years feeling like a few days seems like a sick prank, because Jacob is less Prince Charming and more frat guy.

I don’t blame Jacob though, for choosing quantity over quality, lust over love. I’ve worked for honorable things, only to compromise them to get more for my money. I’ll often

convince myself I'm far too busy to spend time with people who need me, when I'm just looking for a night to myself. I'll lead myself to believe that I'm also in need of me, and that my needs are much easier to attend to. This is the generation of "me first," but people like Jacob were undoubtedly the pioneers.

But even if Jacob is happy with the way things turn out, it's pretty clear that Leah and Rachel are upset a lot. They go to God to fix things when Jacob should be the one providing for them. The Bible never says that Leah and Rachel talked specifically to God about anything, but God seems to answer the women anyway. Leah doesn't feel loved so she has children, but then Rachel is jealous of Leah so she has children. This happens over and over, and the servants get involved and have their own children too. Both Leah and Rachel credit their children's births to God, suggesting that he did all of this to make them feel validated or assist them in spiting each other.

I might agree that God answered them in this way, but then I'd be agreeing to a God who goes behind Jacob's back to handle his marriages and a God who encourages revenge out of jealousy. It's funny how much we can make God agree to. In the case of Leah and Rachel, God seems to be a counselor talking two women through unhappy marriages, completely unaware that he's been counseling two women who are married to the same man. Humans have no trouble in making ourselves look foolish, and making God the fool comes just as easily at times.

The whole scene between Jacob, Leah, and Rachel unfolds like a Maury episode, except that God would not make an exciting host. He'd encourage some heavy moral decisions, asking Jacob to step up and be the man he promised to be, and telling the women to stop asking for children to get back at each other. There would be fewer chairs thrown

and words bleeped out, but there'd be no shortage of heavy hearts and eyes staring at the ground. No cutting to commercials in life's sad scenes.

I wonder if God might just be watching the TV, wanting so badly to change the channel but knowing that he can't turn his back on it. He just hopes that the show will resolve at least one issue before the credits roll. His friends stopped watching after a few episodes, and he wonders why no one ever commits to shows to give them time to come into their own. But after a few seasons, he understands, or stops pretending he didn't.

I don't like the idea of a God who can only watch and not act to change the course of our lives, but I don't believe in a God who directs every action and leaves us no part in our stories. A lot of people argue for this omnipotent God, thinking that the credits of life will roll something like this:

Starring God

Directed by God

Written by God

Produced by God

Set Design... God

Lighting... God

Stunts Coordinator... God

Costumes... God

I'd love to believe that, because no matter how selfish I may be, it would be great to know that I wasn't in control of anything, not even what I wear. God could have complete control over the movie of my life, and we could sit back with popcorn and laugh as it unfolds. We would cry in the parts where I lose people I love, or learn hard lessons, or find

myself walking away from God. But we would smile knowing how it ends, and remind each other that we are sitting next to each other, so everything must turn out alright.

But that's not how it works. If I really consider what God contributes to my movie, or rather what I let God contribute to my movie, it's very easy to replace his name with my own in every single slot. He may know how it ends, but I demand the rights to the middle of the story.

A press release saying God dropped out after "creative differences" over the script would explain this easily enough. I wonder if, after separating to make our own versions of the same story, I would have the better shot at the Oscar. God's movie wouldn't cater to Hollywood, but he would have a lot more dialogue. The characters would be well-developed and all connect to each other in some intricate, inexplicable way like the prophets or the twelve apostles. The lack of a consistent plot might kill him, but he would certainly have something to say. At the end you would feel that something very sincere and real had taken place, but you wouldn't be able to talk about it. Fan boys would ruminate over the subtext for years on message boards, but they'd get no closer to the truth than the writers of the Bible.

My film would be the artsy version. It would be complete with a shaky camera and an undeserved air of mock brilliance. I would certainly have the Oscar vote for tragedy, if our nation was suffering from something debilitating that year like a recession or war or low ratings for American Idol. Its mysterious vibe would beg to be talked about. Unfortunately, the characters are flat, the monologues overdone, and the overall point unexplainable only because there's nothing there.

When I realize how things will end when I leave God out, I always attempt reconciliation. “God, I thought I’d be the bigger man and say I was wrong. Can we start over?”

“...”

If I let God have some control, we could collaborate and my story could find some meaning. God and I would pick a biblical narrative that could use a movie rendition. I might argue for somebody heroic like Moses or Jesus if I’m feeling cocky, but I’d settle for Jonah, at God’s urging.

After reviewing the story and discussing plot points, I reluctantly agree that Jonah strikes the right chord. God asks Jonah to go help the people in Nineveh, but Jonah doesn’t want to because the Ninevites pose a threat to his people, so he runs away. I used to wonder which direction you run to get away from God, but not anymore. As soon as I let go of that Sunday school faith, no paper plate boat could bring me back, no Elmer’s glue-stick could stick me permanently to God.

Jonah probably feels this way, afraid to follow God when the easiness of childhood faith has disappeared. No longer able to take comfort in a paper boat, Jonah sets sail on a real boat to escape God. He boards a boat with sailors headed to Tarshish, a scene fit for the opening of a summer blockbuster. Jonah is a stranger to the sailors—nothing more. The sailors don’t know what Jonah is running from, nor do they care to ask. The captain takes his money and is satisfied with that. As far as he knows, Jonah is only aboard for adventure and not escape. All of his ducks are in a row; he is on solid ground, so to speak.

As they head off into the dreary night, a storm comes. It is threatening and vengeful, as if it is directed at their boat and no one else’s. The sailors scramble to keep the boat from

capsizing, throwing everything overboard, but the winds only toss their boat more, and they feel the night is against them. This scene will surely cost millions of dollars to produce, but it will be a brief blip in the movie, as it takes away from Jonah's screen time. So the sailors quickly realize that someone has brought bad karma aboard, and each cries out to his god to figure out who is responsible. But as they struggle to pray amidst the cold seawater's uninvited entrance onto the boat, the sailors realize the stranger amongst them is unaccounted for.

That stranger, Jonah, is fast asleep on the bottom deck while the world crashes down around him. The captain, with his newfound interest in Jonah, searches him out and brings him to the upper deck with a flood of salty language. Up top, the sailors confront Jonah, asking him who he is and why this storm has come. Jonah blames himself, acutely aware that God has followed him. Without explaining why, he tells the sailors to throw him into the sea. It might be guilt, or another attempt to run from God.

Whatever it is, I don't think it fits into my movie. I would have held out, hoping the storm would pass, sweeping God away too.

The sailors would drop below the deck to my sleeping quarters, asking, "Who's responsible for this? Who are you?" They ask this five or six times, raising their voices each time so I'll wake up. They're also competing with the storm's intensity, so they're pleas with me and prayers to God cannot afford to be silent.

"I'm Ben, and I believe in God, who made the land and the sea," I groggily rehearse, rubbing my eyes and pulling the sheepskin back over my head.

"What have you done?" they scream.

I'm awake now, and cranky. "Whoa, easy. I believe in God, but I don't force answers out of his silence. Don't go blaming me for this. We have to be 100% sure he's talking to me when he pulls stunts like this."

"We think this storm came because you ran away from God," the sailors snap back.

"Again, let's be sure before we do anything drastic," I toss back, knowing they're right.

"We also think we should throw you into the sea."

Knowing how this ends, I make a decision to back off the plank in time. I pause to pretend I am listening for something, and then reason, "Oh. Wait. Wait. Yep. I'm definitely hearing God now. He said, 'Don't do that.' Throwing me into the sea seems to be the opposite of what he wants. He just keeps saying that over and over. 'Don't do it.' I think you'll really regret doing it."

I could have argued like this until we sank, truth be told.

Jonah, on the other hand, volunteers himself to be thrown over, and God protects him by putting him in a fish. I may doubt that God was present in Jephthah's sacrifice, or that he gave Leah and Rachel children for the reasons they believed, but I have never doubted that a fish swallowing Jonah was the work of God. It is one of the most outlandish stories to defend in literal interpretations of the Bible, but sometimes the biggest miracles make the most sense to me.

Inside the fish, Jonah prays. Unable to run away again, he doesn't have much choice but to hear God out. God again requests he go to Nineveh, and Jonah agrees this time. It only takes two times for God to prompt Jonah into his divine will. If it were me, I would convince God that six or seventeen times would be more believable for the character. I

would have spent a lot of time learning the inner workings of a fish. I would spend a few hours studying the food the fish ingests, then attempt to talk to God again.

“Have you come up with anything better than me going to Nineveh?”

“...”

“Okay,” my voice echoes hollow through the fish. “I’m going to keep looking at these fish guts. Let me know when you’re ready to be reasonable.”

A few steps ahead of me, Jonah reaches land. God reminds him what to do, and he goes straight to Nineveh. It takes him three days, and he spends the whole journey wishing the fish had dropped him off closer to his destination. He makes it to the city just as his clothes have aired out the stench of fish and seawater, and gives them God’s message:

“Nineveh will be destroyed in forty days. You’ve been warned.”

Despite the buildup to this moment, the Ninevites correct themselves and that is that. They regret, and they repent. I’m not sure we want to spoon feed the audience a retribution story so simple in these trying times, but the time I spend inside of the fish will cut down on the amount of time for other characters to fully develop. Unfortunate, yes, but the shots within the fish will give us a more lasting indie appeal.

After correcting themselves, the Ninevites are forgiven by God. Jonah, however, is pissed. He points out that this is why he didn’t want to help God in the first place, that he knew God was too merciful to do any real damage. Jonah was apparently also thinking about the movie version of this story, concerned that the audience didn’t want a gift-wrapped ending. Or perhaps Jonah is thinking about himself, knowing that he is now a false prophet for delivering a message that didn’t come to fruition. He insists that he’d rather die than live.

The story was never about Nineveh and its imminent destruction; it is about Jonah's self-destruction from start to finish. Regretting and repenting are not as cut-and-dry for him as it was for the Ninevites, and death seems easier than facing God or a failed career as a prophet. Jonah would rather die, and the Ninevites go with him.

Around this time, Jonah sets up a shelter just outside of Nineveh to watch the city's fate. He lays his cloak down to protect his body from the heat of the sand, and gazes distractedly at Nineveh. God grows a vine over Jonah's head to provide him with shade from the unforgiving sun, and Jonah is happy.

Until God takes the vine away with a tiny worm. The wind blows against Jonah like it did just a few days prior on the boat, and the sun blazes down on him. He is miserable again, and reiterates his wish to die. Jonah is caught in the perpetual net of loving God's protection and hating God's desertion.

"What right do you have to be mad?" God asks.

"Every right," Jonah mutters with parched lips. "Just kill me."

This is the moment where God breaks out of his cookie-cutter demands for Jonah and gets personal. This is the moment where I know that God is listening.

"I can't believe you," God fumes. "You long for a vine that you won't even look after. You pray for blessings until you get them, then you pray to die when they leave. The vine came without your help and it left without your help. What do you do for yourself but makes things more miserable than they have to be? Yet Nineveh has over 120,000 people who need help knowing what's left and right, right and wrong, and you think I should just let them die? That they don't deserve my mercy? Where does that leave you, Jonah?"

The end.

Jonah doesn't respond. The writer doesn't relay any more information. The story of Jonah, at least for us, stops right there. God is furious, Jonah is furious, and nothing resolves. God's words hang in the hot air, and we are left to wonder.

I used to struggle with that ending. I wanted to know what happened, wanted to know that Jonah understood he couldn't just pray for what he wanted but had to take an active role in changing his life. I needed to know that it was possible for him to do that, that it was possible for the story to end well. I could not wrap my mind around the ending, or reconcile Jonah's unlearned lesson after all that he went through. What was Jonah's problem?

Now that I'm older, I think Jonah was afraid of someone else starring in his movie. He was disturbed by the thought of *his* story being overshadowed by strangers obtaining redemption. He was never going to get over his own problems if God kept asking him to fix other people's problems. He was being asked to clean up the mess of 120,000 when he was having a hard enough time cleaning up the mess of one. So he ran away. If he could get away from God, and avoid going to Nineveh, nobody would get to star in Jonah's story but Jonah.

I get that. And God got that. God wasn't surprised that Jonah ran away. He wasn't shocked to learn that Jonah did not want to play second fiddle to a town he didn't care for. God knew Jonah was working toward his grave before Jonah ever verbally wished to die. There are no surprise parties for God, and there are no surprise funerals either. If Jonah and I are running out on God, he knows where to find us. It's always somewhere between the end of a childhood belief and the voyage to God knows where.

Unfortunately, that doesn't mean that God will necessarily bring me back. If I want, I can keep finding boats and excuses to escape on. I can find a boat, find a way off the boat, find a way out of listening to God's will, and keep getting lost finding my way out of God's presence. I can spend a lifetime in a fish and still not get why I'm in it. And I just might. I just might fake every conversation with God until I drown in the sea of my own false words.

We'll end the movie right where God requests for the fiftieth time that I go talk to the Ninevites, and I'm stuck in a fish deciding which is worse: To let God take control of the story or lose myself in my own. The audience will be left to decide for themselves if I found the resolution, or if I allowed the tension to persist. They'll think about this throughout the credits where God and I split the roles, but it will still be a little more than unclear who did what in the film.

God and I would call the movie *In a Fish*. We would come to this after many title changes, from *Jaws: The Mouth of God* to *20,000 Prayers Under the Sea*. After a long day of brainstorming we would opt for *In a Fish*. I'd be very proud of this title, and God would let me take credit for it.

*What God takes away,  
Let's refill all the holes with mud*

—Circa Survive

## *The Hole in Everything*



After the demolition machine destroyed Paradise Lounge, Adam needed a new favorite bar fast. When the bartender announced the closing of Adam's little slice of heaven, he was distraught. As he watched the Garden Operations Demolition demolish the only place he knew to call home, Adam was beside himself. He called Eve on the bar's payphone, a buffalo's horn attached to four or five vines that reached to the few other populated places on Earth.

"You up?" he asked.

"I am now," Eve said. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Adam said, upon hearing her tired voice. "I don't know why I called."

Though Adam would later tell Eve about the end of his joy at the Paradise Lounge, overstating it as "The Fall 2.0," he knew she could offer no help. This sad realization pushed Adam further into his lonely head, further from salvation. His only escape was found in the hardest stuff he could consume.

A seedy, dimly-lit bar would conceal Adam's nakedness, briefly suppressing his shame for throwing away 100 years of God's company on what Eve swore was harmless. Consequently, she never questioned Adam when he stopped inviting her along, knowing he would never get over his loss of innocence at her hands. What Eve did not know, however, was that Adam just couldn't stand the irony of her ordering an Appletini every time they went out. Sure, Adam took his time getting over the Fall 1.0, but he had stumbled so many times since then that it was hard to remember how he had lost his footing in the first place.

Adam finally chose The Snakebite, a rundown joint on the outskirts of town. Eve suspected it was a strip club, but turned a blind eye, choosing ignorance for once. The choice to not know certain things had become nearly impossible since Eve's first bite into the fruit of desire, but she found it necessary in order to swallow the bitter fruit of an unhappy marriage.

Eventually, when more humans populated the earth, ignorance gave way to downright ignoring what Eve couldn't help knowing. She could no longer trust that Adam loved only her, a doubt that Adam did nothing to disprove. He came home from the Snakebite no earlier than 2 a.m. every night, breath reeking of liquor, and the thick smell of smoke on the leaf of his collar. Eve often thought she could smell the aroma of perfumes she never wore, and it was all that she could do to get through the laundry without crying. She was convinced that fidelity was only truly possible when no one else existed.

Eve knew that in the beginning God had created all things. What she could not determine was whether God created everything after that: her pride, guilt, and lust for more, and Adam's alcoholism, depression, and lust for less than God's promises. She was once one of God's promises for Adam, but she couldn't tell what still held up after they

breached their divine contract. Could Adam's behavior be Eve's punishment? But what was his punishment then? She thought that maybe his behavior was his punishment, but had no idea what went on in his head. Most days he barely spoke to her. His responses to her nagging were usually answered by the TV's volume increasing until it drowned her out. The last real conversation she could recall had not boded well for their reconciliation.

Adam had just returned home from naming the animals, his seemingly endless 9-to-5 job, though how much time had passed since 5 was never easy to determine. He had placed a clock on the wall of the tree between their kitchen and dining room, but Eve was still trying to learn which hand was longer, convinced that Adam had not appropriated their lengths in a way suitable for reading. When he finally walked into their small cottage in the wilderness, Adam knocked a lamp to the ground, releasing a swarm of fireflies into the night. Eve smartly gathered that he had stopped for a few drinks on the way home.

"How was work today, sweetheart?" Eve asked. Her flirtatious voice had lost its sincerity since she and Adam had begun having trouble lying together. Before "The Incident," Adam and Eve had no issues with intimacy. Afterwards, however, they had come to realize that they had specific needs and desires that their partner couldn't fulfill.

"It was work," Adam replied, searching for a beer in the fridge.

Eve had been in a good mood all day, the weather perfect for lying out to read the only issue of *Better Home and Garden*. She persisted, "Anything exciting happen?" She tried not to baby-talk him, but her newly-acute awareness of tone made her self-conscious.

"Anything funny or interesting?"

"Huh?" Adam was fidgeting with the TV antennas, two sticks that had served their time well but probably needed replacing. He was hoping to catch the results from last

night's Earthly Idol before he went to get his fix of whiskey and Brandy, a conveniently-named girl he felt guilty for tricking Eve into thinking was the drink.

"Speak up," he grunted.

"I said, did anything interesting happen at work today?" Eve was doing everything in her power to be patient. She knew no other humans after Adam stopped taking her out, and she was lonely. She only heard about other people through the sheepish look on Adam's face when he would say, "I only had a little brandy tonight."

Eve knew that Adam had nothing to tell her. He spent days smoking with some of his coworkers, two lowlifes who Eve couldn't stand when she met them years ago. One of them, Todd, had come on to her one night at dinner when Adam had excused himself to the river to pee. It wasn't that she was opposed to Todd's advances; she was just trying to avoid having more than one sin attributed to her name. The other, Brandon, ogled her as if she was one of two women he knew.

Watching Adam search his mind for something of value to say to Eve, she lost a little more hope. Usually the only interesting things he had to tell her were new swear words he had made up, his creative juices flowing to more than just "giraffe" and "alligator." Tonight he had nothing.

"Not that I can think of, honey," Adam mumbled. "Just another day in the jungle."

Eve hated when he called her pet names, knowing that he spent his days labeling animals like this. She felt no better than them when Adam degraded her like this, and she sat staring at the television while Adam downed three beers in a row. The conversation, if one could call it that, sputtered out soon after, and Adam left without saying goodbye. Eve

wondered if the room would always remain heavy with regret and humid with tension. She felt empty, a hole in her heart where God once filled her life.



She sank  
her teeth in.  
She had never  
done this  
but learned  
quickly.

She asked,  
“Is this okay?”  
She didn’t wait  
for an answer.  
I didn’t have one.



Staring at the golden calf that had just popped up in front of him, Aaron was lost in the idolatry of thought. He had known better than to let his jealousy of his brother Moses get to him again. He had accepted long ago that Moses was superior in most ways. Though Aaron and Moses had not grown up together, Aaron had heard it all in his college years. Returning from Syria University, he sat through many a holiday dinner listening to conversations that rarely strayed from the accomplishments of Moses.

Moses was the star of the family. Moses turned his staff into a hitting machine in Little League. Moses was a natural at shepherding. Moses aced every test on liberation theology. Aaron wouldn’t be surprised if Moses had even hung the moon.

But Aaron had already learned to swallow his pride. He did his best to not harbor bitter resentment toward his parents for favoring Moses. And though Moses was clearly the writer of the family, Aaron took joy in this one small victory: He was a better orator.

Moses was, despite his many talents, not the social butterfly among the two brothers. He stuttered in large groups of people. He was too serious, a consequence of the pressure placed on him to succeed. This allowed Aaron to play the role of sidekick, talking to girls for Moses and guiding him through the basics of communication with others.

“Loosen up,” he would tell Moses. “You’re too tense. No one expects you to play God’s favorite 24/7.”

“You d-don’t understand,” Moses stammered. “It’s a lot of p-pressure to b-be in this position.”

Moses was all too aware of his stutter. His speech pathologist had tried to teach him how to relax and think positively, but it was no use. After months of treatment, the pathologist threw his hands in the air and said, “You’ll never lead God’s people anywhere if you can’t tell them what you’re there for.” Moses added this comment to the list of insults he had heard over the years. The kids at school often called him Piglet, and once a girlfriend asked him if he could kiss her without stumbling over his own lips.

Aaron did feel sorry for Moses, knowing that he was carrying a great weight on his shoulders. A simple speech impediment could make Moses think that he was undermining God’s entire operation. To be fair, Aaron believed that Moses was capable. He believed that God had spoken to Moses in the bush (despite the rumors floating about town that the pressure had gotten to his head), he believed that turning the staff into a snake wasn’t some magic trick but divinely-sanctioned proof of God’s will, and he believed wholeheartedly that Moses could lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Aaron was even genuinely excited about reaching the Promised Land, a just-opened neighborhood of mid-sized condos with swimming pools in every backyard.

Clearly, Aaron was proud of Moses; Aaron was just hoping for more credit than he would receive. After all, Moses only agreed to take on this large task if Aaron could be his spokesman. The Israelites could have stayed in captivity for all Moses cared, because a speech impediment was enough to derail God's train of thought. A single loose screw could drive that great mechanical beast right off the tracks and into the ocean of a man's vast doubt.

Aaron was the only one who could prevent this disaster. But if Aaron was so crucial to the operation, why did Aaron feel like an extra in a bromance about God and Moses? He felt inadequate, and the repressed resentment he had shielded his parents from was starting to creep in on his faith in God's promises. Aaron wanted more than a condo; he wanted to be the realtor, not just the negotiator.

By the time they reached Mount Sinai, Aaron was at his breaking point. He had traveled too far with these thoughts, and he could no longer bear their weight. It was a miracle for Moses to part the sea; it was equally impressive that Aaron kept his lips from parting to scream at Moses or God. He was tired of playing second fiddle in the holy choir.

So when the Israelites, impatient with Moses, came to Aaron with the idea to erect an idol, Aaron spent little time considering it. He did not stop to think why he agreed. Perhaps he wanted a small revenge against Moses for spending alone time with God on the mountain, or maybe he just wanted to see something burn. Aaron never intended to burn his brotherhood with Moses, or his chance at a larger condo in the Promised Land.

The fire blazed. Standing in the light of an idea that seemed so unquestionably right just a moment ago, Aaron felt a darkness come over him. He questioned everything. He wondered if Moses, still on the mountain, was getting answers to anything. But Moses,

perpetually unsure of himself, was now descending from Mount Sinai in a daze of wonder. He would never find the words to describe the scene to anyone, nor would he be able to articulate them if he did find them. All Moses would later talk about was an extensive list of rules God wanted the Israelites to follow.

In this moment, however, Aaron was looking for more than doctrine. He knew that Moses wouldn't cough everything up. Did Moses think Aaron was unworthy of hearing about God? Aaron thought about this while throwing clumps of dirt into the flames. He didn't want to know the truth for fear of wanting to throw Moses into a fire.

Upon reaching the foot of the mountain, Moses was surrounded by an ungodly scene. God had warned him about a disruption, but now Moses wondered if he had misheard what God actually called destruction. Moses recalled the gossip he had heard about the ragers Aaron used to throw in his high school days. He wondered if this unfolding commotion was anything like those. The Israelites were drinking wine to excess and then some. He had been gone for what he thought was only a few days. He thought twice, seeing Israelites making out on top of rocks or stumbling drunkenly to a golden calf to profess their undying love for it.

Aaron was sitting alone amidst the disorder, taking the whole thing in as if he had also just come down from Mount Sinai. Moses, blinded by anger, dropped the very important tablets he had forgotten in his hands, and stomped toward the calf. He began pulling it down immediately, ending several make-out sessions close to the altar. The Israelites were fleeing the vicinity, confused and upset by the perpetual party pooper's return.

As Moses tore the calf to the ground, smashing it into thousands of tiny golden shards, he wondered if he was trying to make up for the parties he hadn't been able to chaperone before. He was like the nervous older brother telling everyone to leave because his parents would return from their business trip soon. Everyone respected Moses, but questioned whether he really was the chosen one and, if so, if they wanted him to be. They fantasized more and more about a leader who wasn't a square.

Aaron, as always, watched Moses calmly and began formulating his excuse for how things had played out the way they did. As Moses walked briskly to him, his face red and hands bloody from the golden shards, Aaron was at a loss.

Moses seethed, "You mind explaining this?" He had the power to temporarily master his stutter when he was furious, another feat surely ordained by God himself. "What have you done?"

"Just calm down for a second," Aaron said. "I'll explain."

Moses barely let Aaron finish before raising his voice and exclaiming, "Calm down? Why can't I leave for a few days without you screwing up? Every time! What's wrong with you?" The party had come to an abrupt end, and the Israelites, too drunk and dazed to recognize their responsibility in the matter, had quieted down to listen to the confrontation between the brothers.

Aaron was embarrassed, mad about so many things and yet unable to articulate anything in his usual clever way. "Here we go again, it's always my fault, isn't it? I'm just one constant disappointment, aren't I? Is that why you and God were up there so long, discussing how I suck and you're the chosen one?"

“You’re seriously bringing this up when I’m talking to God about getting out of here and you’re down here worshipping a calf made of what? Of gold? Your own crap? Explain how this is about me being the chosen one, since you clearly deserve the title.” Moses was fighting the urge to send a plague upon Aaron.

“I’m sorry, alright?” Aaron’s eyes welled up with tears. “It just sort of happened like this.”

“Like hell it happened like this!” Moses spewed, and with that unfortunate phrasing, they both fell silent. Whatever had driven a wedge between Moses and Aaron, the jealousy or resentment or pressure to deliver their people, was managing to undermine every moment they spent together. More and more, they felt like they spoke with shovels for tongues, digging away at the dirt between them only to fall further into a hole of bitter sadness, deeper into the earth and further from God.



Doubt  
 creeping behind  
 on my long  
 way  
 up  
 the mountain  
 where sometimes  
 I meet you  
 but sometimes  
 it’s just me  
 & these  
 troubled  
 thoughts



Out of the twelve disciples, Judas was the last one who wanted to stand out from the rest of the group. He felt more like a last round draft pick than a starter for the team, a

disposable player who would probably be cut after training season. When Jesus kept him around for the duration of his ministry, Judas still felt no solace. Most of the disciples, Judas included, figured that Jesus was far too nice to be honest, or perhaps too prideful to admit that Judas was not the right man for the job.

Jesus had plenty of time to think about this choice waiting in Heaven for three days. Every morning when he rose to meditate before meeting with God about the last part of his work on Earth, Jesus was consumed by a dark hopelessness that overtook his thoughts. This feeling came from knowing that despite what he and his father had just accomplished, the single most revolutionary event of any century ever, Jesus could not win everybody over. The one most on his mind was Judas, who had also just died but with no chance of triumphantly exiting a tomb anytime soon. If he had never chosen Judas, Jesus would not have a red mark on his career, an obvious failure amidst the eventual success of the other apostles. But if he hadn't chosen Judas, who could say that Jesus practiced what he preached about hanging around the lowliest of characters?

Judas was not always a bad guy, as he mostly laid low throughout his career with Jesus. When the disciples would practice their ministry and miracles, Judas was much more comfortable slipping off to talk to one or two sinners rather than getting involved in the messy politics of Gospel-sharing. The disciples would describe him as a shadowy figure, suspicious of his actions but too afraid to question his position among them. Besides, if one disciple didn't belong, what would that mean for the rest of them? Once, when Thomas and Matthew were discussing this quandary, Peter rebuked them, strongly suggesting they never bring it up again.

Jesus was fully aware of this doubt in every disciple, but he had enough troubles of his own without babysitting the disciples' every move. He would try to find levity in the situation when he spoke with God, as they would laugh at the nickname "Doubting Thomas" as if the D-word didn't apply to at least eleven other men Jesus knew. But knowing that he had a limited time to save a depraved generation, Jesus sincerely hoped that Judas would just pick the trade up over time, though he slowly suspected more and more that this would not be the case. Jesus often caught Judas lying in bed for days at a time after failing to convert someone, unable to shake the dust from his feet or the loss from his conscience.

Judas would emerge from his room after reading another inspirational book like *How to Win Christians and Influence Pagans*, but never learned anything from them. They would advise him to highlight his strengths, but Judas didn't know of any. They told him to try telling parables, but Judas was never good at endings. They encouraged him to embrace the power of knowing Jesus, but Judas wasn't sure he did.

As Judas plunged deeper and deeper into the abyss of his misfit soul, his greatest fear was the post-Jesus future that Jesus constantly spoke of like some conspiracy theorist. If it were true that Jesus was going to leave this earth soon, who would stand up for Judas's position among the chosen? Judas had never felt the brotherly love and encouragement he desperately needed. A children's therapist had described Judas to his parents as a "special child," and Judas had stacks of job rejection letters encouraging him to apply again in a few years when he had "worked through his social anxieties." He grew up seeking approval from wherever he could find it, which turned out to be nowhere.

So when Judas was offered a job working for a radical hippie, he agreed immediately. Hearing the job required no special credentials, he believed he finally had a chance to fit in. Jesus was aware of Judas's motives when he applied, but still accepted him into the internship program because he saw potential in everyone, for better or worse.

But three years later, whatever potential Judas had was gone. He only had more doubts about his worth and a world without the one person who seemed to see something in him, at least at one point. Judas often felt angry at Jesus, questioning why he would call twelve men into a business that Jesus planned to abandon in three years. He would talk about preparing a new office for them in Heaven, but Judas couldn't help thinking he would never see the space.

It saddened Jesus to know that someone didn't believe in what he was trying to do. He had heard God talk about this feeling many times before, usually during holidays or times of war. Jesus was beginning to understand what God felt. To think that there were millions of people in the world who would doubt him no matter how many people he healed cut deep into Jesus' heart, millions of holes individually poked for each nonbeliever like Judas.

Judas had half-believed that Jesus would rise again, but he was not sure what exactly that meant. Judas felt that whatever it was would not help him in his current condition. When Judas sold out Jesus to the chief priests, he was not doing it out of his anger; he was looking for something, a last ditch effort to have his need for approval filled.

The whole thing was supposed to go down in private. Judas did not want this to appear in the Gospels, did not expect nor desire to have anything outside of his name

mentioned on the list of disciples. He went at night to meet the priests in an alley away from the eyes of anyone who might be a journalist for the Good News.

Judas waited a few hours, talking himself in and out of the betrayal while kicking stones. Hundreds of people must have walked by, holding their purses or children closer when they passed the deranged-sounding man. When the priests finally arrived, Judas was drenched with sweat from cloak to sandal. He was now aware of each passerby, and jumped whenever they looked his way.

He spoke under his breath, "What can you give me for giving you Jesus?" Judas was not looking for fame or a position in the Senate. He wanted something simple, in the form of a stipend, a pardon, even just a pat on the back.

One of the priests muttered through a sly grin, "Thirty pieces of silver. Nonnegotiable."

Judas shifted his eyes back and forth between the ground and the priests, weighing their proposal. He wanted to ask if his identity would be protected, if he would be put into the Witness Protection Program so that he could live a life away from the tabloids and angry believers. He wondered whether he was looking in all the wrong places to fill the hole in his chest.

"Okay," Judas choked. He slowly laid out the information for the priests, each word tasting like betrayal, like regret, but, mostly, like there was nothing left to be said after this.

Now, a few days later, Jesus sat in Heaven, counting the hours until his physical body would be resurrected. He wondered what it would take to convert every lost soul in the world, to convince them that no trap is inescapable, no stone incapable of being rolled away. He criticized himself for not inviting Judas to more exclusive hangouts with Peter,

James, and John. He had not spent more time with the trio for their potential, but because of their room for growth. If there was a mistake being made, or a conversation about the greatest, these three were always at the center. Since their reputation reflected on Jesus' as well, Jesus did his best to help them reflect the company's mission statement. He took Peter, James, and John under his wing in order to refine them, not to adulate them. Along the way, however, he realized that there were nine other men with room to grow, but he would not have time to personally assist them.

Judas, unlike the inner circle of apostles, did not pose a threat to Jesus' ministry any more than he proved to be an asset. Though Jesus was aware of Judas's knack for doubt and depression, Jesus was not worried about how it would reflect on the company. Every follower of Christ slipped into periods of unbelief in themselves, as if believing in anything but Christ alone was blasphemy. As long as this inner turmoil remained private, Jesus focused on worrying about public embarrassments to the gospel.

Jesus now wondered if he had put his loaves in the wrong basket. Perhaps it was the quiet ones who would erode Christ's work, as each step into lonely sorrow would drive them and their peers further from love. Sure, Jesus knew all along that Judas would betray him. This wasn't what bothered Jesus. It was Judas's betrayal of himself that Jesus had not predicted. How was Jesus to know that Judas would hand himself over to death after handing Jesus over? Redemption was literally days away from Judas, but his patience and hope were already spent.

Jesus finally realized that Judas had never had never thought beyond the cave, had just seen it as the final, dark hole to fall into forever. Jesus knew better than to be alone

with these thoughts for too long, but wondered who else was giving up in this seemingly short span of three days, who else was turning from his grave to step into their own.



I know  
you tried  
but there's a hole  
in everything  
where the dark  
resides  
& how am I  
to know  
if you're still  
in there  
or if you left  
long ago,  
not to return  
before I give  
in  
to some  
other  
god?

*The God I read about can't go where he's not asked to go*

—Kevin Devine

### *Wish You Were Here*

“There is no place where God is not,” used in the immeasurably spiritual landscape of Africa to describe how God inhabits every facet of life, is a truth that seems to sprout throughout nations and ages. Africans are not alone in believing that God is everywhere. Optimistic believers around the world deem it impossible to separate ourselves from God, convinced that neither doctrine nor diction can explain God away. Because of this, most societies don’t have a word or concept for religion. Their spiritual lives aren’t separate from their secular lives, so there’s no need to call this part of the heart ‘church’ and that part of the heart ‘dirt.’ Even saying that life has parts contradicts the way they think a human should function.

There are times when I’d love to believe that God is everywhere, that no matter where I am—or who I am—he will be there. But I spent the last several years searching for him to no avail. I put out “Missing” ads all over town, sent a search party into my heart and through deserted streets of my life, even waited in one spot sending out signal flares for

God to find me. Nothing worked. I lost God, and myself, and I don't know how to get either back.

I once looked for God in a church, until I wasn't sure where all of our tithe was going or why we talk about saving souls but not about saving lives. I thought God must go to a different church; I just wasn't sure which. It couldn't be a megachurch, since they funnel too much money into playgrounds and bathroom renovations. It couldn't be a small church, because surely God's time is better spent where he can make a significant impact. God must find a happy medium, but if my image reflects back on my father's, he'd always find something to turn him off.

I once looked for God in pretty girls, but I felt disgusting and wondered if the body being a temple meant one temple per person. I thought Jesus was exaggerating when he said it was adulterous to look at a woman lustfully, but years after puberty I got what he was saying. It seemed like the more holy ground I stepped upon, the less holy it got. Blessings start to look like curses when you overdo them or misuse them. Women lost their value when I thought I was free to ogle them as my eyes pleased. Besides, my own body was less a temple and more the garbage dump out back.

I once looked for God in a lost-and-found, but all I found were things that made other people happy, like rings and money. I dug further, but I got trapped in all of the junk that only crushed me. Sure that my thoughts weren't consumed with earthly possessions, I tricked myself into ignoring my idols of more entertainment, more attention, more me. I thought God might be hiding at the bottom of the filth, so I kept digging. He wasn't there. I wondered if I would ever see him again.

For awhile I believed that I would find God in the presence of people, but sometimes I feel lonelier around others than without them. It has been said time and again that God is always found in community, but Jesus spent a lot of time trying to get away from people to pray. Did he know something we didn't? Was God actually in the loneliest places?

I tried being alone to see what Jesus had figured out. Two years into college, I was thinking about transferring schools. I didn't like where I was and I didn't like who I was there. Getting out of bed went from a chore to a daily heartbreak. I made plans to cancel plans, thinking I could keep friends but still be alone. My words became hollow, my thoughts drifted to ending it all. The cause of depression can seem trivial when you look back on it during better days, but the effect can drown you before you have the chance to come up for air and think about how to swim back to land.

What first held me underwater was that I didn't move away for college. I was surrounded by my family, friends from high school, new friends in college, and a youth group at the church I was working at. I lived too close to everyone I had ever known. I couldn't give enough time to anyone so I just disappointed everyone. It was overwhelming, and I could feel myself sinking beneath their expectations. It made me hate myself, wondering if it really was my fault that I couldn't live up to what anyone wanted from me, including myself.

I thought if I could move somewhere else, I could become someone else, someone I liked more. But then other people started pouring opinions about the decision into my ears, and I could hear every viewpoint but my own. By that point, changing schools didn't matter; I just wanted to get away from people.

But I didn't. The money to go somewhere else wasn't there. God didn't seem to be anywhere in sight to help out, financially or otherwise. I didn't get away from myself, or anybody else. I stayed in the same place with the same people with my same feelings of unhappiness, and no escape ever presented itself. Amidst all that confusion and loneliness, God never spoke up, perhaps because I never had the privacy needed to hear him.

Jesus never got the privacy he desired either. He kept going to pray, and people kept finding him and intruding on his God-time. I sometimes wonder if his prayers ever got delivered, if Jesus ever got what he wanted. In one of Jesus' prayers, he asked God to not make him die on the cross. He didn't get his wish, and I wonder if that's because God was so used to not hearing Jesus' other prayers that he thought, "What could one more hurt?" I know this isn't the truth, but I feel this doubt weigh on my own unanswered prayers too often.

When I talk about Jesus in this way, I know I am only talking about myself and not about Jesus at all.

I am more like Elijah, looking for God in the wind and the earthquake and the fire, only for God to be waiting in the silence. But I'm so afraid of what I won't hear in the silence, so sure that God isn't there, that I just keep turning up the volume on everything else. I consume myself with school work, with friends who make me feel good about myself, with whatever new TV show that will keep me busy.

Or, maybe, I'm afraid that God *is* in the silence.

I might hate what he has to say in those moments of stillness, what he will ask of me without words, so I drown him out with distractions. I talk myself into thinking that God isn't where I need him to be, but is it me that's not where he is?

Muslims, regardless of how their beliefs differ from mine, give God the attention he deserves. They aren't afraid to give him power, even if it's too much. Disagreeing with the Christian concept of the Holy Trinity, the Islamic faith argues that splitting God into three parts takes the awe of God away. I think they're right, because a God that can be narrowed into bullet-points on a PowerPoint is no God at all. But I've spent too much of my life trying to take God's power away. I worry that I'd split him into more than three parts if I had the chance. The more pieces God is in, the easier it'd be to lose some.

It's probably the greatest deception Christians in America have pulled. We boiled God down to lists and charts in the backs of Bibles, separated scripture into subheadings, and labeled each part of our lives like food in the fridge. We put our names on doctrines with notes that said "do not touch" for anyone we don't like. When someone tries to pull a better theology out before we're ready to digest it, we say, "I'm saving that for Sunday."

It's much easier to keep God in a section of the fridge separated from the mystery meat of moodiness and the Jell-O of shaky convictions. I eat one thing on my plate at a time, so keeping God in one section of my meal is second-nature. I would probably eat God last, but not because I think he's the desert: If I'm full from my sins by the time I get to him, I could just put God back in the fridge and eat him as a leftover when I'm regretting the day's events later that night.

I realize that God should be the main course and not the leftovers, but it is far too easy to indulge in other things while God grows stale.

Every time I think God has too much control over a part of my life—a relationship or a major life decision—I try to put him in his place. If I know that God doesn't want me to be with a girl, simply because I feel even further from him when I'm with her, I'll break up

with her. But I'll spend the next few months looking for love in lust. I'll let my eyes wander and my thoughts go even farther, until God finally shows up at the wrong time. It's almost funny, how I can spend a year not seeing God anywhere but then he's waiting in the very place I'd like him not to be.

The rich young man who approached Jesus about getting into Heaven knew what this felt like. He had kept every commandment about not murdering or committing adultery or stealing and so on; he must be close. He had invited God into almost every part of his life, except one.

Riding on his purebred donkey, the rich young man used his vast network of affiliates to locate Jesus. One of his business partners was associated with a fisherman who happened to know another fisherman who knew Peter. Through asking the right questions to the right people, the rich young man was able to track down the traveling band of disciples.

When Jesus heard the trotting of the man's donkey from thirty yards off, he looked up to see the man flashing him a big grin with sparkling white teeth. "Hey Jesus," he said. "What must I do to get into Heaven?" He was a shrewd businessman, so he knew how to cut to the chase.

Waiting a minute, Jesus looked into the man's eyes as if to search for something that would help him formulate his answer. Then Jesus rattled off every commandment that the rich young man had kept, speeding through them and abbreviating the obvious ones.

Continuing to flash his pearly whites, the man boldly proclaimed, "Done, done, and done. What else is left?"

Surveying the man's clothes and looking at the donkey he sat on, Jesus replied, "Sell your stuff."

The rich young man just walked away.

He had invited Jesus in for a tour of his heart, but when Jesus asked what was in the closet, the man's professional composure was replaced with the nervous defense of a teenage boy. He shooed Jesus away and said, "Nothing. Just some junk in boxes. I hardly remember what's in there anymore."

The truth is we know what we keep in the closet more than anything else.

Forget the fridge; we make homes out of our sins, and rarely do we invite God in. Or, like the rich young man, we make homes for God, but keep one tiny part of the house for ourselves. I invite God into areas of my life that I know he will be proud of, but when he asks to see something I'm ashamed of I kick at the ground and make some excuse. When he comes over for dinner, I show him my trophies, awards, and medals, hoping to make him smile at how his son turned out. But all along God barely notices what the awards are for, because he's staring at the locked door just down the hallway.

"What's in there?" he asks. Without pointing to the door, I know what he is referring to.

"You don't want to see that," I say, attempting to laugh. "I'd be embarrassed if you saw how dirty that is right now."

"Maybe I could help you clean it up."

"I can do it myself, but thank you." I pick up another trophy to steer the conversation back to my accomplishments, but I can barely read the inscription through blurry eyes.

"Umm, this one was for..."

But God's eyes are fixed on the lock door. We sit down to dinner, where the sound of scraping forks is the only noise interrupting the silence between us.

"I know where you've been, son," God finally says. He places his fork gently on the table. "And I know what's in that closet."

"I wish I could say I know where you've been," I whisper. My eyes don't stray from my plate. I focus on chewing, but the potatoes turn to rubber in my mouth.

"I haven't gone anywhere. It's you that moved out."

I think back to the moving truck and the boxes stacked to the ceiling, the feeling of leaving when I wasn't ready but felt I had no choice. "I had to grow up."

"There's a difference between growing up and being independent. You want to be an adult, but you've yet to leave your childish ways."

I push my plate away, tears welling up in my eyes again. "And I'm sure you think it's really easy to do that, but somehow you never answer me when I ask you how I'm supposed to act, what I'm supposed to do, how I'm supposed to make the world's most distant father proud. You can't be pleased. You just want me to depend on you."

God clears his throat. "Can you pass the salt, please?"

I stand up, knocking my chair over, throw my napkin down, and walk away. I head for the locked closet, and I spend the rest of the night crying in the tight space while God knocks on the door and begs me to come out.

"I didn't mean to upset you," God says. "I just don't think you have the full picture, and I can't just tell you what you have to learn for yourself."

“Just go away,” I sob through the door. I repeat it to make sure he hears me, choking on the stuffy air in my small quarters. If the gate to destruction is so wide, why does it feel narrower the longer we walk down it?

But I stay put, suffocating in my own filth while I beg God to leave. The tongue truly is the rudder that steers the whole ship, because I am always using mine to steer away from God. I’ve wrecked a number of friendships with my mouth, always cutting the hull against sharp rocks instead of choosing a course that could bring us back home. Even when I am not trying to navigate through a storm, it’s usually the times I’m short with my mother that I regret the most. She just wants to hear about my day, and I can barely manage the word ‘fine’ before my bedroom door shuts in her face. I’m embarrassed to think that God is standing there with her, the door catching him on the nose.

What shall I say, then? If I go on believing that God is nowhere to be found, am I just looking in the wrong places? And if I go on thinking that I can lock myself away in the wrong places and avoid God, won’t he find me? I know that nothing good lives in me. Like Jonah, like Moses, like the rich young man, like Adam, like Peter, like everybody who ever lived, I know I am no good for God, so I do what it takes to get away. I steer clear, I keep him out, I push him away, I set sail, I distract myself, I make excuses, I hate everything, I do not love a single thing but me and I hate him too.

None of this was ever about believing that God wasn’t present in my life; it has always been me running to him or from him, whichever is convenient at any given moment. I’m the ex-boyfriend resisting the phone call to an ex-girlfriend when I miss her, trying so hard not to send a postcard on my lonely vacation that says, “Wish You Were Here.”

I know that God is here. I know that wherever I am, he is there if I want him to be. I try to keep him from certain parts of my heart because if I can label him, if I can put him in a box and keep it in a corner of my closet, then I can believe I can't find him because it was my choice not to keep him with me. It seems that somewhere along the way, he got relocated to the closet, and I moved the contents of the closet into the rest of the house. That way, I can lock him away when I don't want him to see the home I've made for myself. I can forget he's there for awhile, and stumble upon him occasionally. I can go on living as if I misplaced him, in hopes that I'll find him again in another lifetime.

A long time ago, in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve got lost. They went to the only place God asked them not to go, and made it their home. As soon as they did, they realized they were naked, and thus began the long human history of hiding the lives we're ashamed of. When Adam and Eve understood what they had done, they hid from God among the blessings they had cursed. God came walking through the garden to find them, and called out, "Where are you?"

I spent the better part of my college years asking God that question. I got so angry with God for not being present in my problems, for not speaking into the silence that engulfed me, for not steering my ship back to him. I blamed him for people ending up the way we are. If he had kept a better eye on the only two people on Earth, would we have ended up so lost? I thought we would have had a better chance. No one would think about anyone naked, no one would speak to other people out of anything but love, and no one would be depressed surrounded by people that don't understand what they're going through. I assumed he was taking his second rest ever on the wrong day. Adam and Eve had just enough time away from God to ruin everything for all of us.

I used to think there was no way that God was everywhere if he lost sight of Adam and Eve, but I'm starting to believe the truth is that they lost him. Maybe we all have just enough time away from God to ruin everything for ourselves.

I'm trying to get found. I know that God calls out to me like he called out to Adam and Eve, asking where I am, trying so hard to bring me back to him. I'm seeking out that voice, but I haven't found it yet. I'm knocking on every wrong door until I find the right one. I'm asking all of the wrong questions until I get the right answer.

Where are you, God?

If you really are everywhere, where am I?

*We spoke about the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost  
And which Psalms we had loved the most  
Then we all turned to dirt and dust*

—Brand New

*death, explain yourself*

1.

6.4 miles from my house. I looked it up, against my better judgment. It was much closer to my girlfriend's house, but I stopped myself from seeing just how close when 6.4 popped up in seconds, proving how close Death comes to your doorstep. He was 17, he couldn't pay someone back for some drugs. He was shot. I don't know if he was leaving or coming, but it happened in the parking lot. Around 10 p.m. I heard. I could have checked the details, but I'd really rather not know. I'd rather not know if it was that early, if people were still coming in to eat, if they saw it happen. Whoever was there, I bet they screamed. I bet there was a lot of crying, and I bet most of the people thought they were in danger too.

6.4 miles. My girlfriend lives 7.3 miles away from me. Same direction. She was in California, but her family was home. How far does the sound of a gunshot go? I couldn't look that up either. However far it goes, I bet people who weren't even at Whataburger thought they were in danger too. At the Pizza Hut next door, certainly. But probably farther.

Maybe at the QT a mile down the road. Maybe at my girlfriend's house. Which means many people felt those three gunshots drive into their souls. Which is far enough for the fear of life unfinished and last words misused to pierce that seemingly still moment between the bullet leaving the barrel and tasting the air.

My girlfriend's brother knew him. They were friends.

2.

I regret saying "Death can come to your doorstep." That was a cliché. I also don't like to capitalize 'death,' for the same reason I don't capitalize 'devil.' I hear that the refusal to capitalize takes the power from the word. I don't think it works, but neither does capitalizing. Using the cliché might have worked, because it holds less power than a real description. Or maybe I am just trying to convince myself that I have some control over death.

I know death wouldn't stop at the doorstep. In all of the times it has visited me (not my house directly but close enough), it has always barged in, too early, too unannounced. I walk into the kitchen and find my mother holding the phone, death in her tears. I walk through the living room too slow to miss the TV speak of someone passing. I close my bedroom door, thinking I can keep death out, but find myself looking up how close Whataburger is to my house.

I am describing death in lists as another method of taking its power away.

It isn't working.

3.

To be fair, only one person I've really cared about has died. In every other case, I have only known the dead as acquaintances, or indirectly. But each one feels the same.

When I hear someone has died too young, I cry. I wonder what they would have done if they had been given the chance to grow up. When I hear someone has died halfway through life, I still cry. I wonder what they had left to do, if they hadn't started to do what they should have been doing all along. Maybe they thought there was plenty of time. When I hear someone has died of old age, of the natural things that come with advanced years, I don't usually cry. I do, however, wonder whether they regretted the things they did or didn't do.

Sometimes I am not sure if I am sad for those people, or if I am sad for myself, having not done most of what I want to do. I don't even know what exactly I want to do before I die. Either way, I know I'll die before I get done, in the middle of what I set out to do, begging death, "Just five more years, please." At any moment, a car can crash into yours, and that's it, curtains close. Or you can be out with your family at Whataburger, and get caught in the line of fire of someone else's life, and that's it, no do-overs.

I am going to cry if I keep thinking about it.

4.

In *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman says this: "All goes onward and outward...and nothing collapses,/And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier."

I understand that Walt was surrounded by death, in the midst of the Civil War, and had to make some peace with the end of things. But unless Walt had a transcendent moment where he experienced death and came back to tell the tale, I always read that line and think: Bullshit.

5.

There is a song by the band Brand New about a young girl, seven years old, who was killed on the night of her aunt's wedding. The little girl was the flower girl, and they were in a limousine, when a drunk driver hit them in a head-on collision. I had never considered a car crash involving a limousine, but if I had, I would have thought the length of a limousine would protect everyone in a head-on collision except for the driver. But I did not have the chance to take comfort in this thought, as this was the first limousine crash I had heard of. I looked the story up after hearing the song, and I really wish I hadn't so that I could have believed it was just a song and not real.

After the wreck, the mother of the flower girl found her daughter's head in the aftermath. The mother sat there with her daughter's head in her hands. There was nothing left for her daughter to do, nothing left for the mother to do but sit there. "And I, with one last night to be your mother," the singer laments. It makes my stomach turn to think that perhaps the mother thought it was her last night to be anything to anyone.

Life would go on, people would tell her, and she has other people to live for, but I have to wonder if she wanted that. I can't imagine how a mother could live without her child, especially after seeing her child die, so I assume she saw that night as the end for both of them. And the rest of the family might have felt the same, and the drunk driver too, and anyone who saw it happen. The paramedics, the preacher at the funeral, the guests at the wedding, everyone who was there and everyone who wasn't, all of them must have seen or heard about this wreck and known in their hearts that there was no more living to do without their flower girl to keep the ceremony going.

I do my best to avoid funerals, because I do my best to avoid death. I do not like the phrase “life goes on,” because if my mom or dad or sister died, my life would not go on. So if a funeral can be avoided, I do not go, and I pretend that the ceremony cannot go on if I am not there to acknowledge death, to look it in the face and say, “You win.”

The last funeral I went to was in October 2010 for the mother of a high-school friend. Kathy was diagnosed with cancer and died one month later. Cheyanne was an hour away at school in Denton. I don’t know where she was when she heard her mother had died, but I hope she wasn’t alone. I thought holding your daughter’s head in your hands must be the worst way to discover that she is dead, but then I knew it would be worse if someone called me to tell me my mother had died.

Cheyenne and I were not particularly close, but we were class officers and casual friends. She would pretend to hit on me every day at school, and I would pretend to hate it. I don’t think of it often, but I don’t want to act like we were much closer than we were. I know that death can bring people closer, but it can also make us act like we were closer to people all along. We cling to lost relationships when we regret not holding onto them when we had them. I know Cheyanne isn’t gone, that we could maintain a friendship if we tried. But two years after her mother passed, she’s in another city at another school, and I only catch up with her every once in awhile.

One of the other class officers texted me when she heard about Cheyanne’s mom, and we agreed to go to the funeral to be there for her. I never met Kathy, but she was younger than my mom, and I knew she was Cheyanne’s favorite person in the world. All of this made the funeral hard for me to get through.

I sat next to my eighth-grade ex, whom I hadn't been close to since we broke up at the age of 13, and we held hands during the prayer. I remember thinking how incredibly stupid we are as kids, how ridiculous it is that someone's mom has to die before we can get over things that meant nothing a few weeks after they happened. I wished I had been nicer in high school, and I wished I had tried to be a real friend to Cheyanne instead of having one little joke throughout the years. The funeral was no place to start being a good friend, because it was the first time I was supporting her in a time of need.

## 7.

My grandmother will die soon. My family has realized this for several years, which makes it seem like she is not dying soon, but every year she fades from existence a little more. She cannot form full sentences, just murmurs "yes" and "mmm" here and there. She cannot do anything on her own. The ladies at the nursing home feed her, change her, and help her go to the bathroom. My mother visits every few days. I go with her once or twice a month. We can say anything, funny or not, and my grandmother will laugh regardless. After about fifteen minutes, she falls asleep. I kiss her on the forehead and tell her I love her.

I feel sorry for my grandmother, in the helpless state that she's in. But I feel sorrier for myself. I didn't tell her I loved her until I knew she was sick. Even then I waited a few years, convincing myself she would get better. When she did, I would tell her I loved her, not out of obligation or fear that it was my last chance, but because I really loved her. Now, I tell her I love her, and she just smiles. I can't tell if she knows what I am saying. I tell myself that she knows, that I did not start saying this too late, but I can't be sure.

## 8.

When I was 12, a body was found in a car in a driveway about ten seconds down the street from me. I don't remember if I saw the car before the police found it, but I always imagine a car I saw parked there once was the car with the body. To this day, I cannot look at the driveway. I promised myself not to look up its exact distance from my house.

## 9.

About a year ago, a house twenty seconds away from the driveway with the body in the car was burned to the ground. A man lived there with his wife, son, and father-in-law. The man stabbed his wife to death and set the house on fire while his son and father-in-law slept. They didn't wake up in time. The house is gone, but it is still hard for me to look at the emptiness where it sat, where the grass still refuses to grow again.

The house was somewhat isolated, no houses close enough for them to have neighbors. I used to think the people in it must be very lonely without neighbors. The family seemed to be the only people ever at the house. I never saw them, but I saw their car. They must have been lonely. I can't remember if I thought this before, but I think about it a lot now. If someone had known them, if another house had been closer, maybe they would have lived.

The man locked his son and father-in-law in the burning house, and left. They must have woken up, must have tried to escape, must have exhausted every option before dying. I'm just afraid that they died because they didn't know who to call.

## 10.

Death Cab for Cutie has a song called "What Sarah Said." It's about a woman who dies in the hospital. The singer describes the scene in the waiting room, the anticipation of bad news coming, the conviction that he'd rather lose this girl than to have never known

her. When the nurse brings the news that the woman has died, the singer reflects on something that a girl named Sarah once told him. Sarah isn't the one who dies, but she does say something that still hurts to hear. Near the end of the song, when the sick person dies and the music all but stops, the singer reflects, "But I'm thinking of what Sarah said: That love is watching someone die." As the drums start to pick up and the guitars swirl around your head where Sarah's words linger, it sounds as if the instruments are trying to resuscitate the sick woman or just feel something (I still can't tell if it's hope they are reaching for) and the singer asks: "So who's gonna watch you die?"

I cry every time I hear it: "So who's gonna watch you die?" It makes me think about the people in the house who didn't have anyone to save them. But mostly, it makes me think about myself. I don't want to watch the people I love die. I'd rather die before anyone I love deeply does. I don't want them to have to watch, but I also don't want to die alone. I realize that even dying in the same moment as someone next to you must feel incredibly lonely, but I can't help that I'm afraid of all of this.

## 11.

My high school vice principal is the most gentle man I've ever known. He is the only person I refer to as gentle. He was cussed out, yelled at, and harassed by many kids, but I never saw him angry. With a calm look on his face, he would just direct them to his office. He knew that when they got in his face, they were just taking something else out on him because he wasn't going to fight back.

I always imagined that in his office he would sit kids down and ask them what was really going on, why they were lashing out. I don't think he would have suspended anyone who opened up and told him about their problems at home, how they felt lost because

things just weren't going their way. I can't confirm any of this, but that's just the kind of man that he is.

He had twins that were my sister's age, a boy and a girl. They were 22 when the boy, Hunter, died in a friend's apartment. I didn't know him, but the news was devastating to our town. I don't know how my vice principal reacted when he heard that his son had been taken too soon. I want to imagine that he was as calm as ever, but I don't see how that could be possible. I would have felt like God had wronged me, that all of those years of putting up with selfish kids who yelled and cussed were useless if my son was just going to be ripped from my life.

I would have yelled and cussed at God, and when he brought me into his office and asked me to sit in a chair made of clouds to ask me what was really going on, I would have just kept yelling until God suspended me. I would storm out, knocking pictures down on the way out, and say, "Forget it, I quit."

I think I'm talking about suicide, but I am afraid to say so.

But my vice principal is a better man than me. I don't know how he handled his son's death, but he did quit his job. I am sure he is just as gentle as he used to be, though I imagine he feels emptier. I often ask my mother, who knows the family pretty well, about the parents, but I can't bear to even wonder how their daughter is doing without her brother.

## 12.

I still don't talk about this because it scares me, but I once thought about crashing my car. I am ashamed to even think about it. I didn't want to kill myself, but I felt a lot of pressure from friends, family, school, work, and my own unrealistic expectations to be a lot

of things I wasn't. I thought if I crashed my car (not into someone else's because I only wanted to hurt myself) that people would stop expecting me to do anything. It was selfish, but mostly, it was stupid. I didn't realize at the time that suicide doesn't always mean thinking directly about death.

## 13.

I think this is why reports of suicide have a sobering effect on me. They cast a dark cloud over each day I hear about one. More kids than ever end their lives too soon, or maybe I am more aware of it now. Every time I hear that a teenager has killed themselves after being bullied, I am paralyzed. I cannot go on with my day without thinking back to when I was bullied or when I bullied myself. My ears pick up stories from the news before I can block them out, and my entire body becomes motionless, my surroundings completely silent. For a moment, I know death firsthand.

I say a prayer that these types of deaths, that all deaths, will end someday. I am never sadder than when I think about how a few petty words can be the tipping point for a misunderstood soul, how a word can wound a child so deeply they want to stop living.

## 14.

Death, if I capitalize your name and give you the respect you demand, will you leave me alone? If I acknowledge that you are there, can't you stop reminding me of it? Can't my recognition be enough suffering?

What will it take to satisfy you, Death? What is it that you want?

Answer me, Death.

Explain yourself.

## 15.

Earlier I said that I have only lost one person I really cared about. My grandfather passed away when I was in the seventh grade. This was near the end of the days when I was bullied, but I still remember running out the green metal doors at the back of the school building every day the bell rang so that I could escape the kids who did not understand me. I wanted the comfort of my mother, who had spent the last half of my sixth grade year signing me out for lunch so that I could have an hour away from my torturers.

It was April. When the bell rang, I ran from the school to my mom's van. When I rounded the corner, I saw her propped up against the side of the van, as if it was holding her up. My sister was waiting in the car. I don't remember how my mom told me. My Papa had been having heart trouble, and my mom and her brother had talked with our Mimi and decided to pull the plug. That was the worst day of my life at that point, and it probably still would be if I had not blocked most of the rest of the day from my memory.

After my grandfather passed, I don't remember being made fun of anymore. Actually, kids still made fun of me, but it didn't matter anymore. Big things become so small when bigger things happen. The weight of getting bullied felt much lighter when the weight of my Papa's death took its place on my shoulders. Though it weighted heavy on me, I was more optimistic about death then. I wanted to live for my grandpa, to make him proud while he watched in Heaven.

## 16.

If all of us had forever to live on Earth, we would waste our time. I'll give death credit for this. Without death, there's no deadline to accomplish our life's ambitions. We would never start living. Absolutely nothing would get done.

Death, if acknowledged before we ourselves die, makes us appreciate people. We hold on to them while we have them. We set out to do the things we don't have many years to do, and we might even get a few of them done before it's all over. I think this is perhaps healthy for us. I think it is sometimes what motivates people, the fear of a life unlived. Some want to be remembered when they die, but I would prefer to remember doing something of substance while I can remember it. All of us will be forgotten, but perhaps we can live memorably enough to be satisfied with our own lives when death does call.

Am I undoing everything I said? Is death winning, regardless of me fighting it or making peace with it?

17.

After my grandfather died, my grandmother became sick. She's been holding on for six or seven years, but I know she'd rather be with my Papa. She got sick because he died; she couldn't live without him.

When my grandpa died, I believed in Heaven more. But I have to believe in it now for the sake of my grandmother, my mother, for the sake of everyone who will someday die. The Brand New song ends in a swirl of instruments banging against existence as the singer assures himself, "I'll never have to buy adjacent plots of earth/We'll never have to rot together underneath dirt/I'll never have to lose my baby in the crowd/I should be laughing right now." He is talking about Heaven, that future place where none of this will matter to him or the flower girl's mother or anyone. He is convincing himself that it is there. I want to ask him if it worked. I want to ask that flower girl if, at the end of her long walk down the aisle, Heaven was waiting for her to start the wedding.

18.

When my girlfriend called to tell me about the shooting at Whataburger, I said, "I'm sorry. I don't understand why this happens."

I said it over and over, no other answer to give.

19.

After going through all of this in my head, I have come no closer to another answer. I thought if I knew death, I might be able to conquer death. I could study what death does to me and after learning all about the power of death, I could stand up to death and say, "You hold no sway over me."

But death, I feel your grip on me, and I don't expect you to let go. I cannot grasp you, come to terms with you, let any good lesson you teach outweigh the pain you inflict. I have said everything I have to say about you, and I have said nothing at all.

20.

I am not ready to see someone I love go.

*Can you think that whatever made us—would stop trying?*

—Lee, *East of Eden*

### *God Rests His Soul*

“Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to return to your seat. The seatbelt light is on, and you can’t use the restroom right now.” The flight attendant delivered this request with precision and perkiness, hoping to convey kindness in her instructions.

“Oh it’s okay, really, I’m G—,” God stopped, ashamed of himself for almost revealing his identity just to relieve himself only twenty minutes into the flight. He cleared his throat and muttered, “Yes ma’am, I apologize.” He had made a promise not to let anyone know who he was on this trip. He returned to his seat, placed it in an upright position, decided he did not, in fact, need to use the restroom, and that was that.

God had not taken a vacation since the seventh day of Earth’s existence and had recently determined it was high time he took a break from his work. The Great Physician had self-diagnosed levels of stress that would eventually decrease his ability to perform. Projects had become overwhelming lately as they continued to stack up, from keeping his

name out of the upcoming election to the leadership summit with the prophets to discuss appropriate avenues for revelation.

Despite these larger tasks slowly covering God's desk, it was a tiny clerical error that provided the catalyst for his meltdown. A secretary had accidentally filed a prayer for "a win in our tournament next Saturday" under the "Needing Further Review" folder, and God stumbled upon it in the exact moment he was ready to break. He began throwing curses down upon the secretary, and at one point vaguely threatened to take her wings. He stormed back into his office where he slammed the door so hard it shook the gates of hell. Prayers were thrown all over the office, still unanswered and now very disorganized, but they would have to wait for God to be in a better mood. He left them strewn about the clouds, and made a swift and loud exit from the heavens.

Because God had stormed out so quickly, none of the angels had any time to make flight arrangements and Matthew didn't have a chance to budget expenses for the trip. God didn't care. He was fed up, and headed straight through the atmosphere to do things the earthly way.

He dropped himself into Canada on his way out of Heaven, in a heavily-forested area a few miles outside of Toronto, where he was only witnessed by one very terrified backpacker. "Whatever," God thought. "No one will believe him." When he arrived at Toronto Pearson International with no ticket in hand, God took the last seat headed to New York City. America was not his first choice for a vacation spot by any means, but he knew it was the one country he could probably remain unrecognized in.

The flight was a redeye to LaGuardia International, the last seat available being, unfortunately, in first-class. Now God knew how this would get blown up if the media ever

got wind of it, what with all of his son's talk about the first being last, but God decided to take his chances in comfort rather than stick to his guns next to the bathroom everyone flocks around midway through any flight. He also got an aisle seat, which he preferred, because he had looked down through the clouds long enough. He'd take any other viewpoint.

God had left Heaven in such haste that he only had time to grab his emergency carry-on, filled with enough clothing to last a year (just in case) and toiletries. With his boarding pass in hand, he walked to the security line, slipping out of his sandals and placing them in a gray bin on the conveyer belt. He walked deliberately through the metal detector, which started beeping immediately. The TSA agent, only half-attentive to his duties, asked God, "Do you have a watch on, sir?" God laughed at the thought, and, knowing it was his belt that caused the disturbance, removed it with his free hand. He tossed it in the trash can with his toiletries, which were thrown out when a security official had pointed out that they all exceeded the 3 oz. limit. The TSA agent seemed slightly perturbed by a man throwing his belt away just because it was inconvenient, but didn't say anything else. For once, God appreciated the apathy of man.

Sitting at his gate, God didn't notice a three-hour delay, as he lacked any notion of time. When he finally boarded, he felt a great sense of relief overcoming him. His relaxation could commence soon. After barely avoiding the revelation of himself to the flight attendant, he had nothing at all to worry about.

But something was off. God could place his finger on the problem, of course, because he's God: He was afraid. For the first time since humans had made his job actual work, God was taking his eyes off of them for a period of rejuvenation. What if it all went to hell?

God had what he referred to as babysitter's fear, where everything is going swimmingly, but fear of turning away for two seconds keeps his eyes on the children. They might break something, or burn the whole house down, making him scared to even blink. So now God was left alone with the thought that, while amongst them, the humans could take a worse turn than ever.

"That's absurd," God thought, dismissing his irrational fear while placing his sleeping mask over his weary eyes. "How much worse could it get, really?"

"What?" the passenger next to God asked. God had not noticed the passenger up until this point, a businessman in a two-button pinstripe suit with cufflinks shiny enough to reflect in the dim light from the overhead bulbs.

Had the passenger...? No. Could it be that he had read God's mind?

"How much worse could what get?" the passenger restated God's question. God pulled his mask up and glanced at the man, not seeing him as one who would receive divine revelations, and quickly realized that he had thought out loud for so long in Heaven that he had forgotten to keep his thoughts internal on the plane.

"Oh," God said. "These *Ice Age* movies." He dismissively waved at the overhead screen. "Don't you think they should have quit by now?"

"I can't really say I've noticed them," the man replied. "I'm a little old for that kind of movie."

"I guess I'm just really observant," God mumbled, not one to back down to man's sarcasm but reluctant to draw more attention to himself. He was finding it harder and harder to relate to humans.

As he pulled his mask back down over his eyes, the seatbelt light dinged and the pilot announced that the plane would be descending momentarily. God had not caught a wink of sleep yet, and now it was too late. He wondered how many years he could spend on earth, in Heaven, anywhere, before realizing he had not rested at all despite his best efforts. As hard as it was getting to shrug these minor annoyances off, God put his tray back into position and the *People* magazine back into the pouch in front of him. The magazine was not an accurate representation of people, he kept telling himself. But this did as much good as a parent telling their kid they were not unintelligent, regardless of evidence presented by their grades and pretty much everything that left the kid's mouth. He had not even bothered with *Sky Mall*, knowing it only contained shameful products with miraculous results.

Because of these minor annoyances stacking up on Earth as they did in Heaven, God was beginning to wonder if this trip was worth it. He had left Heaven because of a miniscule, bothersome mistake, but all he was running into on Earth were millions of them. To make matters worse, the plane was beginning to experience turbulence on its descent. The pilot came over the intercom to tell everyone to remain calm and in their seats, but God could see where this was going. He unlatched his seatbelt and began making his way to the front when the same flight attendant who had not allowed him into the bathroom blocked his path.

"Sir, in your seat. Now. I am not going to ask again. This is serious." She was attempting to focus on the instructions, but fear was creeping its way into every word.

"It's okay," God said. "I'm a retired pilot." This was not a lie. God had flown planes to various parts of Earth before on business trips, just as a way of walking in people's shoes.

He liked the feeling of “roughing it,” as doing human things gave him small challenges to overcome quickly. He had less time for this kind of recreation in recent decades.

The flight attendant hesitated, but ultimately trusted God. She led him through the aisle, knocking on the cockpit door for the pilot to let them inside. “Umm, sir,” she said to the pilot. “This man says he used to fly planes.” The pilot turned around, a panicked expression on his face. God had heard his prayers about getting promoted for months, and knew that the pilot was only weeks into the job.

“The s-storms,” the pilot stuttered. “I can’t—”

“I could probably take it from here,” God said, patting the pilot on the back.

Twenty minutes to an hour later, God couldn’t tell, the plane landed safely at LaGuardia, after passing through a storm that calmed as soon as he took the controls. The entire cockpit was cheering, singing God’s praises to the passengers, and telling him he would be honored as a hero when the world learned of his bravery. But God would have none of it. When the doors of the plane opened, he was at customs without his carry-on. He was becoming more and more paranoid about unwanted attention.

The customs officer looked God up and down. “Passport?” he asked curtly. God checked his pockets, but he was only buying time. He knew he had left his passport back at home.

“Umm, I forgot it,” God said, nervously laughing. The officer reached for his phone, but God was already sprinting away.

“Hey, get back here!” the officer yelled. “Stop that man!” But God was long gone, with no plans of returning to this airport any time soon.

Airport security searched for him for hours, postponing every flight until the next day when it was clear that God was not going to show up anywhere.

The two stories, of God landing the plane and breaking into the country, both made national headlines, but no one ever connected the man who saved a flight to the man who might be a terrorist. God would do his best to avoid both favorable and unfavorable headlines. He was not out for credit or blame, just trying to get away from both.

To avoid recognition, he found a Yankees cap and sunglasses at a small tourist shop, paid in cash, and focused on actually starting his vacation. Was that so much to ask? Could not the Creator of everything create an escape for himself? It seemed less likely by the minute.

But God pressed on. He went on the hunt for a hotel. Any old inn would do at this point, honestly. He walked through the grimly-colored streets of New York, wincing whenever he heard his name used in vein. "For God's sake!" a taxi driver yelled. "Don't you know how to walk, jackwagon?!" God took this name-calling a bit more lightly than the blasphemy, as these were all names he could see himself calling people if it ever came to that.

This was in addition to the rank smell of sweaty humans on sizzling pavement in the middle of July, gum that seemed magnetically drawn to God's shoes, and, worst of all, the newspaper stands he was trying very hard to ignore. "I'm not going to look," God kept muttering under his breath. "I'm not going to look." And yet his eye kept getting caught by his worst fear, that the world was falling apart while he wasn't watching:

STOCK MARKET CRASHES, MONEY WORTHLESS

RIOTS CIRCLE GLOBE, ENTIRE POLICE FORCES QUIT TO JOIN

AIRBORNE DISEASES SPREADING RAPIDLY, KILLING MANY

What was happening? Could God really not take a break without everything going terribly wrong? Weren't things bad enough when he was at work? As these questions circled his head, God kept walking, but the headlines got worse as he journeyed along:

MOST ANIMALS FACING EXTINCTION IN NEXT THREE MONTHS

TSUNAMIS HIT 12 MORE COUNTRIES

MORE DEATH THAN EVER, APOCALYPSE SUSPECTED SOON

WORLD WAR III TO BEGIN NEXT WEEK, POLLS SAY

It was all happening this fast, or this slow, God didn't know. God could not guess how long he had been walking. He also could not tell where he was anymore. It appeared he had only walked a few blocks, but perhaps he was unknowingly circling the same area. He looked at the faces around him to see if he recognized anyone but, of course, he recognized everyone. God was lost in New York while the world caved in on itself. For the first time in eternity, he didn't know what to do.

It was all spiraling out of control again, just like it did that first time, just like it had always been since forever. And all along, despite anything he did to try to reclaim Earth for Heaven, things got worse. They always were. God was blamed when it was human's fault; God was blamed when it was no one's fault. And now God wondered if he should blame himself. Rest or no rest, the world would turn on itself until there was nothing left to turn on. If the world was going to burn, perhaps God should be among his people, seeing them through to the other side, where apparently he should have stayed. Would it matter if he was way up high in the clouds watching it all burn or here doing the last bit of good possible before it was too late?

When it came down to it though, what God really wanted was sleep. He wanted not to have to ask these questions, to not have to fix things or watch them fall apart anymore. He wanted to fall asleep and wake up and it all be over. No more Earth, no more responsibility, no more trying again and again to restore what kept breaking itself. It was like driving an old car that broke down every time he tried to start it: He loved it despite the fact that it had become an artifact of a time long gone.

This was the world now: a souvenir, nothing more. Something to keep in the garage, to remind God of the good old days. But when were those exactly? Lost in the clutter that piled onto everything. God was trying his hardest not to see this desolate place as a mistake, but feared that the Perfect one had indeed allowed imperfection in his design.

If there was ever a time to hang it up eternally, put the cape in the closet and let go, it was now. If God intervened, he'd have to end the world here and now to make everything better. He knew Heaven wasn't ready. He had discussed the building design more and more with Jesus over the years, but the execution just wasn't there yet. "I've told you an infinite amount of times," Jesus had said, leaning on a shovel and shouting over bulldozers. "Heaven isn't ready until they're ready. Its whole design is premised upon them building it right from where they are. I can't negotiate on that."

God knew all of this, but kept an inkling of hope that maybe his son had found yet another way out for people. The world only got worse when Jesus left, so the thought of trusting people to build Heaven seemed more ludicrous every day. They were asking people to build a palace on a garbage heap. Normally, God's optimistic side would win. "From trash we make treasure," he would tell himself.

But not today. God just wanted his vacation. He was sick of compromising. He wanted massages, drinks with tiny umbrellas, hotels with towels shaped to look like animals, Jacuzzis with high-powered jets, manicures and pedicures for his weary hands and feet. He wanted it all for himself, just once. He longed for these things, and daydreamed about making the sun stand still again, so that the world could pause while God played. What a world that would be.

Lost in thought and still unaware of his surroundings, God stumbled into Times Square where many media outlets were filming segments the growing turmoil. Times Square had become a center for riots since the End of the World had begun, and there were reporters everywhere. Flashy signs and blinding lights were being pulled down with cranes, fights were erupting every few feet, and TV stations were constantly changing location to avoid angry citizens who tried to break their equipment. The city was collapsing, and New Yorkers were doing their best to finish the job.

God stood amongst this, unbeknownst to himself, when a sign for *Wicked* came crashing down just inches from his face. It was already on fire on its way down, and exploded when it hit the ground, catching God's clothes on fire and burning his beard to a crisp. He hurriedly put out the flames, but the scene had already drawn the attention of onlookers. A homeless man, drunk out of his mind, brought God's eyes away from himself in an instant.

"Hey! Ain't that God right there?" the man bellowed. God whipped around to find a crowd of people staring at him. They were cheering the fall of yet another advertisement for a consumerist world when the homeless man called their attention to the man in the middle.

“Yeah,” a heavysset lady piped up. “That is God! I’d recognize him anywhere!”

The camera was facing God now, along with the rest of the city. He still appeared calm on the outside, but inside his panic was unsettling him. He had not prepared an exit strategy.

“Well?” a reporter asked. She immediately recognized that this could be her moment even as the world burned, the miracle she had waited so long for. “Are you God?”

“I, uh...” God was at a loss. All of the pent-up frustration and exhaustion had taken its toll, and he had been caught. There was no divine intervention to save him. Not only would he be seen directly by humans, giving them an excuse to say that God only appears as himself, but he would be called to answer for the burning planet he was visiting. He would have to give a straight answer, something he loathed. Heck, he would actually need to have an answer for the millions of questions they would ask. For once in his eternity, he was not sure if he was prepared to give those answers. How could God apologize to his people for their hell when he could not give them Heaven just yet?

Every eye in Times Square, and now the world, was on him, waiting for his response. He had nowhere to turn. With this conviction in his heart, God knew what he had to do. His vacation had been a complete and utter failure, and he could not keep pretending that he would eventually get his way. It was time to let go of the belief that God could ever rest his soul. With a deep sigh and a growing feeling of reluctance, God created one escape route for himself, which he knew was no escape at all. With the eyes of the burning world burning into him, God shut the power down in New York, putting every light and camera temporarily out of service, and went back to work.

*...every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.*

—Genesis 6:5

## *The Descent*

### I. In the Beginning

Soon after everything began, God was ready to start over. It wasn't because Adam and Eve had sinned against him. They had been thoroughly punished for that, and God figured they couldn't do much more damage. It wasn't even that God favored their son Abel, and their other son Cain had killed him. Though this made God's success rate with humans 1 for 4, with the one success already murdered, God wasn't yet deterred. Not much later, however, there were enough men to disappoint him with the same sin: Lust. This was what finally drove God to draw up new blueprints for better humans.

As more men came into being and had daughters, those men looked at other men's daughters and thought, "Nice." They noticed the beauty of God's work, but perhaps a little too much. No one on earth had restarted God's work after Adam got laid off from his first job. This gave men plenty of time to talk about women while wasting time at The Watering Hole, a hangout where they mixed fruit juice with other ingredients to make new drinks

that left them less knowledgeable than before. This daily debauchery led to the invention of dirty jokes.

Whenever a female would walk by, the males would stop their shouting and roughhousing long enough to stare at God's creation. "Look at her," one would point, while his friend whistled, a noise they had perfected to convey appreciation of a woman's assets. Another would punch his friend in the arm and say, "I would lie with her in a heartbeat." Statements like this would usually incite an argument amongst the men over who would indeed get to lie with the female, with the stronger men always winning after an arm wrestling match.

Over time, the men would learn how to describe the different parts of a woman in ways that made God cringe. "Would you check out those apples?" one would say, making light of the first sin while creating new ones. Another would say, "I'd like to gain some knowledge from that fruit. I can tell it's good, I just hope she's evil in the hay." The men would talk like this for hours each day, devaluing everything that God had deemed worthy, until absolutely everything about women was reduced to trite, offensive statements about their looks. When God gave Adam the creativity to name the animals, he never expected Adam's descendents to come up with "tits" and "ass" for the parts of a woman.

These daily assessments of women became the original beauty pageants, a misleading term by God's account. The winners of these pageants were rewarded by their judges with homes, rings, grand banquets, and jewelry. The judges rewarded themselves by taking the winners to bed to bow down to what their eyes had worshiped. Their creative minds were able to undress the women well enough, but removing the fig leaves with their own hands gave the men even more to talk about back at The Watering Hole.

“You should have seen the way she used her mouth,” a guy would describe in amazement, surprised he hadn’t thought of the idea himself. Not to be outdone, another would casually state, “Yeah, she made noises I’m pretty sure she invented. Or maybe I invented them, if you know what I mean.” When the women allowed these men to know them in the most intimate ways, they had no idea they were allowing all men everywhere to know them just as well. The men would spare no details about their encounters, giving each other plenty of ideas to suggest to their wives, so that every man could have his needs fulfilled as he desired and surely deserved. Soon enough, men were coming home with proposals of new positions, uses for body parts, and other ways to accommodate the dominant gender. It was a very good time to be alive, if one was a man.

Women, on the other hand, had no idea what they were missing in their relationships with men. None of them had been taken on a real date, none had been asked to express and share their feelings, and none of them had been exposed to a gentleman, as none existed. Females, as descendents of Eve, were taught from a young age that the world was bad because their gender had messed everything up. After all, it was Eve that had tempted Adam, or so the family history went. If any curious young girl had bothered to ask, “But didn’t Granddad have free will to tell Granny no?” she would have been put in the stables to sleep with the goats for a month. She would not be allowed to leave the goats to rejoin the sheep until she learned a hard lesson in keeping her God-given curiosity to herself. From the time they were just children, then, girls were taught to submit to the fairer sex.

And so women grew up to believe that they should do as they were told, and not expect to be treated as God’s creation, or even as human beings. When they passed by The

Watering Hole and heard the way men talked about them, they told themselves they were lucky to be considered “hot” or “doable,” and they told themselves they deserved nothing better when they were spoken of in lesser terms. When they were handed over to marry men that described them as “good enough,” they thanked God that he had made someone who could love them for their shortcomings in appearance, a prayer that always made God angry enough to curse. Finally, when they were asked to “try this thing that my half-brother said his chick did,” the women got down on their knees and thanked God that at least they weren’t alone.

Sick of the widespread lust that had made a mockery of his work, God was ready to start a new project to destroy the old one. When he saw how men saw women, he realized his spirit would not remain in men forever. God had created humans in his image, but when that image was gawked at, God decided he wanted no part in it. He knew he no longer belonged on the earth he created, in the people he crafted, or the hearts he had molded. “I can’t do this forever,” he said. “And neither can man. When they are 120 years old, each one’s time will be up. 120 years of damage for each man is more than enough.”

He laid his head down on a cloud, closed the eyes that had seen too much, and waited to fall asleep. But sleep did not come. As he listened to prayers, he became restless. Prayers flooded his ears about cheating husbands, unsatisfying sex, and emotionally-distant wives. Everybody wanted answers for what humans had caused. God fiddled with a cloud until it was wrapped tightly around his finger to form a Q-tip. He began cleaning his ears of the nonsense that filled them. When he still heard the prayers, he fashioned earplugs out of trees. When that didn’t work, he sent a heavy storm to drown out the pathetic cries.

Peace was nowhere to be found. God looked down from the sky and knew that his revision to the life of men was not enough. He scanned the earth to see the women he loved so dearly treated as objects by the men he loved so dearly. Somehow, within just a few hundred years, his people had been devastatingly misdirected. God wondered if he should have made men without eyes, or women without beauty, but no possibility consoled him. His heart was heavy. His eyes were fixed on the ground, the world he couldn't look away from.

As he quieted the only storm he could control, a single tear fell from God's gigantic eye and hit what would later become Russia. The tear flooded the entire area, destroying every plant, animal, and human within 100 miles.

God watched as the land mass became a swimming pool, and had an idea. "What if I started it all over?" He looked at his reflection in his teardrop and thought about a do-over. "I could flood the earth, and kill every living thing except for two of each kind. The few people left would only have each other, and they would be grateful for each other's hearts, not their bodies. I could fix this. This could be good again." God knew he had the pain needed to produce that many tears; he just needed a family to carry out the plan with him.

Searching men's hearts, God located the only righteous one, Noah, and did not waste another minute to begin his massive cleanup. He called upon Noah to build an ark and fill it with beautiful creatures, not the crap that men filled the ark of their minds with.

And with that, God began the earth for the second, and hopefully last, time.

## II. After God's Heart

David was a man after God's own heart, but shortly after being described that way, he wasn't much of a man at all. David had been handed quite a bit in his young age. As a boy, he was chosen to rule over Israel despite the fact that he resembled a string-bean. He threw a rock at a giant and kept his heart humble despite the praise that came his way. He became king of Israel at the ripe age of 30, and believed that God would keep giving and giving until David couldn't take anymore. Somewhere along his journey to having everything, David's heart began to follow a different god, one he named ego.

Much to God's dismay, lust had not been washed away in the flood. It washed up on shore in the wreckage, and continued to do its damage, as if attempting to kill it only made it stronger. No matter how much God gave men, they always wanted more. At least, it was more in their eyes, and less in God's, but he couldn't seem to get that across to anyone.

David was no exception. Holding both a kingdom and God's approval in his hands, David turned his gaze to what else he could grab. It didn't take him long to realize women were decent prizes. During his men's annual trip to wage war in springtime, David got lonely and more than a little bored. He spent most of his days in his appropriately-sized king bed. Silk curtains surrounded the bed frame to match his silk pajamas. The pajamas had a sheep embroidered on the shirt pocket to remind him of where he came from, days of innocence that he could not return to.

In the sheets of the sheep he once tended, David would waste his day alternating between sleep and thinking about finding a woman to lay with him, and what she would do to him when she got him out of his pajamas. The more he pictured this goddess, with her braided hair draped down to her buttocks, and her seductive whispers detailing things she would do to him, the more David turned to chasing her instead of God.

“Find me another wife,” he told his soldiers on their way out to battle, but each woman they brought back had a defect, either in their accent or the size of their breasts. On one occasion, David’s soldiers brought him ten women, all with different features, with hope that David could settle for one. This backfired. One woman had the breasts the size of melons, and David made a show of having each soldier cop a feel to know exactly what to look for in the future. But when he turned her around, David found that the girl had no rear-end to speak of, and asked her where she lost it. Embarrassed, the girl showed him her breasts again, but David’s eyes had already moved on to the next woman. He was thinking about how to take this woman’s butt and put it on the first girl, a virtual mix-and-match that only left David flustered and unfulfilled.

Eventually, David gave up on his soldiers. They couldn’t find the woman of his fantasies because they couldn’t see inside his mind. David knew God was not about to assist him on this kind of quest, so he decided to take matters into his own hands. He began splitting his days between his bed and the roof of his mansion. He would spend his time in bed drawing up a blueprint of the girl he was looking for, and then proceed to the roof where he would scan the neighborhood for his dream girl. This was somewhat difficult, considering that his mansion put a distance between him and his subjects, but David had the means to afford fancy tools like binoculars.

A guard would stand at the entrance to the roof so that no one could disturb the king from chasing skirts from up high. “If God won’t give me the model I desire and deserve, I’ll use my own power to bring my queen home,” David said to himself, peering from house to house in search of the thing that would catch his eye. He wished his binoculars could see up the robes of the women below, but David remained as patient as possible.

Months passed on that roof, and David saw no signs of sexual fulfillment. His concubines bored him, and he wouldn't allow them to kiss him or look him in the eyes when they visited. Most of the time they couldn't even get him to perform, and he disposed of any girl who blamed him for what they couldn't do.

David needed his sex goddess to appear soon. Though he often found comfort in knowing that just thinking about such a woman made him slightly less lonely, those few minutes of suspended isolation were increasingly replaced by a heightened awareness of how truly alone he was. David thought it might be time to give in to someone less than he deserved.

That's when Uriah moved into town. Miracles from God come in all forms, and David was sure that this was one of them. David didn't catch where Uriah was from, nor did he hear much of what Uriah said when they first met. His attention was fixed on Uriah's wife, Bathsheba.

Bathsheba was a young woman who had almost all of the qualities that David had dreamed of. Though her breasts were slightly smaller than he had hoped for, not quite the melon-size of the woman with no butt, and her complexion was not the fairest, she would do. After all, she was only 15. There was a good chance she would grow larger breasts when she reached adulthood, and her complexion could become fairer the more time she spent indoors with David.

"Very nice to meet you," David said. He kneeled before Bathsheba to kiss her hand, He lingered for a moment too long to catch her scent of evergreen perfume. Turning his attention to the only thing between him and the fulfillment of his fantasies, David asked Uriah: "What can I do to make your move into the city easier?"

“I’d love to serve you,” Uriah said. “I think I’d be a great asset to your army.” Uriah was very eager to work, and David immediately sent him to enlist. Uriah was magically shortlisted to join the front ranks, and began work the next Monday. When confronted by a man in the second ranks who had waited several months for a promotion, David attributed Uriah’s jump to the front to his impressive resume, which David never actually received.

David headed for the roof early in the morning on Uriah’s first day in the army. He did not want to miss anything going on in Uriah’s house, which David had set up close to the mansion by kicking a family out on claims that they had not kept their quarters up to the king’s standards. Bathsheba was up early, opening the homemade drapes she had put in the night before. She was preparing for a bath completely naked. David nearly fell off the roof. Fully exposed in the light of the morning, Bathsheba gracefully stepped into her bathtub, where she rubbed each and every spot that David could not wait another minute to get his hands on.

“Go to Uriah’s, and fetch me Bathsheba,” David told his most trusted servant, speaking with him on the steps to the roof. “Don’t ask questions, just get her for me. This is the one.” David’s servant had been prepared for this event years in advance, though he had started to believe it would never come. He left the mansion in a hurry, and was back with Bathsheba, still wearing the robe, in a matter of five minutes.

“Here you are, sir,” the servant said to David, who did not notice the servant standing there.

“God has never given me anything this fast,” David thought aloud, forgetting the years it had taken him to finally settle for someone. He took Bathsheba by the hand to his

bed to show her everything he had thought about alone for all of those years. Bathsheba was a servant of the king now, and could do nothing but submit to her superior.

“I thought I saw someone watching me bathe from your roof,” Bathsheba said. This made David’s robe tighter as he realized that he found someone perhaps as horny as he. He laughed at himself, knowing that was not possible.

Back in his quarters, David had Bathsheba out of her robe within seconds. But that was not all that David could do within seconds. After thinking of this moment for years, David could not wait another minute. Still standing in the doorway, he slipped inside of Bathsheba, and was finished before she had a chance to start.

This was no fault of Bathsheba’s. She was forced to make sense of everything quickly, but it was already over. She did none of the undressing, none of the performance, had not even tried out the king’s sheets. David’s lust-filled eyes had looked into hers full of discomfort, and she had not been given the chance to use the grace with which she had just bathed herself only minutes before. Bathsheba was embarrassed for David, and wondered how often the king had used his status to disappoint beautiful women throughout the land. She was suddenly very thankful for Uriah, a simple man who worked hard on everything he did.

As David stood there awkwardly, he felt frustration creeping into his heart again. He was humiliated beyond what he could stand. All of the years he had spent thinking about the woman who would satisfy him had caused David to forget that he was an integral part of the equation. He had learned to only be satisfied by himself. Sensing Bathsheba’s discontent and feeling no release from their encounter, David now knew he could not

satisfy anything at all. He began to wonder when he stopped being a man after God's own heart, and became a man after his own heart's empty desires.

Knowing this thought would put a damper on anything he could say to woo Bathsheba, he asked her to leave, and made a conscious decision to talk with God as soon as possible. David's first sin had dismantled his kingdom piece by piece, bringing him to his knees. He wanted to speak to God, but couldn't remember how. He feared there was no right way to ask God to forgive him for the sin he was wired to commit over and over for the rest of eternity.

Bathsheba became pregnant from her one encounter with David, turning an otherwise forgettable moment into the only thing they could think about. Uriah had been off fighting for David, so there was no easy way to make the baby look like his doing. David panicked, and asked Bathsheba if she really wanted to keep the baby.

"I have the money and the means to find the right people for you," David whispered in the alleyway they agreed to meet in. "They'll make sure it goes off without a hitch. It's a private clinic in the little town east of the Euphrates, where no one will be suspicious."

But Bathsheba refused. "I should have never trusted a king, even if you were hand-selected by God. You're a worthless sack of dirt. I'm keeping the baby. Decide what you want to do now to get out of this, O Great One. And try to sweep this under the rug, because I already have girlfriends who will run and tell everyone what the precious king did if I should happen to disappear."

David was at a loss. He called for Uriah to come home, in a last-ditch effort to convince Uriah to break his job contract and share an intimate night with Bathsheba on their anniversary. But Uriah was loyal in all the ways David wasn't, and refused to sleep

with Bathsheba while on active duty. David was out of viable options. He knew that confession, honesty, and repentance were all obviously unreasonable, so he did the last reasonable thing: He had Uriah killed in battle, and married Bathsheba.

God watched the tragic scene play out from his lonely spot in the sky, but did nothing to stop it. He delivered one sad message of warning through a servant, Nathan, as he could not bring himself to face David himself, and left it at that. Nathan detailed the damage that God would do to the kingdom after David died. God knew that more lust and deceit would come from David's descendants, and knew that meant more heartbreak for him. He wondered if David would ignore his own iniquities and accuse God of causing these misfortunes, but David never did, and God was left to question himself. He had tried once before to stop lust from destroying men, and had sworn never to do it again. At the time, he thought he had taken care of the messes men made. Apparently, they had only just begun.

### III. Father's Work

"If you even look at a woman who isn't yours, you're committing adultery in your heart." Jesus knew these words were harsh, possibly extreme, before they ever left his mouth. But surrounded on a soon-to-be famous mountainside of Galilee, Jesus was unwavering. He had never preached to such a large crowd, and already he was making enemies. A lot of men got up to leave during the middle of this part, telling their wives to get the kids and meet them at their donkeys.

"I don't know, it sounds like a valid point, Frank," one woman could be overheard saying. "Maybe we should see where he goes with it." Frank immediately regretted

elbowing his wife during the part about earthly treasures, and stormed off to smoke with the other grumpy men.

Jesus had tried to explain to his father that this would happen. He thought that easing into these radical ideas might be better, but God was adamant that he be blunt. "If I had been blunt from the get-go," God said, "maybe you wouldn't have to be here."

Jesus never knew how to respond to his father when he said these things. A sad, distant look would form on God's face as he gazed down at Earth. Jesus would slowly walk away, trying to leave his father to his thoughts while he went to play baseball with the angels.

Yet despite his inability to respond to God in these moments, the memory of this look gave Jesus the necessary push to do his father's will, and say what no one wanted to hear.

Jesus pressed on with his impassioned speech: "If your right eye causes you to sin, take it out. Get rid of it. Better to lose one part of your body than for all of it to be thrown into hell." He was sweating by this point, wondering if the threat of hell was too far. More people were leaving, and he could see the agitated men at the foot of the mountain pacing and fidgeting with their lighters, looking to see if their wives were getting up yet. But Jesus also recalled what he had heard about his father's flood all those years ago, knew how lust had taken its toll on man.

Jesus didn't want any rock unturned, so he took the warning further: "And the same goes for your right hand. Take it off it makes you sin. Throw it out. Better to lose that one part than to go to hell with it."

“That’s it,” one disgruntled man huffed. He took his wife by the arm and told his two sons cover their ears while they descended the mountain. “This man is a lunatic, and you’re all crazy for listening to him,” he shouted to the crowd. “If our ancestors thought it was alright for a man to admire a woman, it’s alright for me.”

Other men in the crowd cheered him on, getting up to follow him, but most of their wives remained seated. “What’s the matter, baby? Don’t you want me to admire you?” another man asked his wife.

“Yeah, only me,” she whispered, looking up at Jesus. He nodded his head at her, seemingly the only one who heard her.

Jesus had specified the eyes and hands because God had explained how easy it was for man to confine sins of lust to below the belt. “I want them to think about where it starts,” he said. Jesus gathered that God’s many, many years of depression was brought on by men demeaning God’s creation throughout eternity. It was reason enough for Jesus to call any lustful look a sin.

But only months after he had preached this extreme message, Jesus found himself on the other end of the argument, fighting for grace before harsh truth. After spending a night on the Mount of Olives, talking to his father about his week’s triumphs and failures, Jesus went to the temple courts where he knew he was needed. After the scene the males had caused at his first major sermon, Jesus had been on the lookout for questions about the birds and the bees.

Jesus sat down in his favorite corner of the court, where he remained somewhat concealed by the crowds. He sank his teeth into some fruit from a street vendor he had met on his way to the temple. The man had looked like he could use the denarii, and Jesus had

been fasting for several days. "Two birds, one stone," Jesus thought. "Not that I condone that."

As he settled into his spot, it took two full minutes for all of the people to turn to Jesus in his small corner. Having gotten used to this, Jesus did not hesitate. He swallowed a grape, asked God to speak through him, and opened his mouth.

He immediately stopped, however, as he noticed a commotion at the far entrance of the court. A group of Pharisees were pushing their way through the attentive crowd, dragging a woman by the wrist. The people had turned from Jesus to clear a path for these men, and were doing their best to not make eye contact with the Pharisees, the woman, or their neighbors. They all had the bad feeling they were about to be lectured by Jesus again.

Jesus rose to greet the Pharisees, but was given no chance for pleasantries. "Teacher," one of them panted. "We caught this woman committing adultery. We're supposed to kill her by law." He searched Jesus' eyes, and then prompted: "Well? What do you say?" The Pharisees knew Jesus' position on adultery, and were sure they had hit the jackpot. They were eager to see Jesus forget his "free love" rants, and return to his Sermon on the Mount militancy.

Looking not at the Pharisees or the people in the crowd, Jesus looked sadly, intently, at the accused. His words had been used as ammunition against her, and he did his best to apologize with a solemn expression. He was used to being attacked for his words, but he hated having other people get caught in it.

Keeping his temper in check, Jesus kneeled down, and began to trace his finger in the sand, writing something that looked like gibberish. What looked like gibberish to humans, however, made perfect sense to Jesus' dad. God looked down at the prayer that

Jesus was spelling out, understanding that Jesus was buying time to think and call the Pharisees names he wouldn't dare say out loud. It was an anger management tactic God had practiced with Jesus after the table-throwing incident at the marketplace.

Perhaps Jesus had been too radical when he talked about lust. He wanted men to change their ways, not condemn others. Yet condemnation was what many took from that first threat of hell, never for themselves but for others. It was pointless to explain that he wasn't even the one who would judge men at the Pearly Gates, but he preferred that men have the fear of God than the empty threat of God. Jesus desperately wanted his father to feel like he was getting somewhere in the world, not farther from it.

Mulling these things over, Jesus noticed the crowd had not stopped staring at him. The Pharisees egged him on: "Well? Tell us what to do here, teacher. You said yourself what to do when one part sins, and we're just trying to know if you meant it."

"We're supposed to stone adulterers," another reminded Jesus. "The Law says it!"

The Pharisees were just like the uneducated men on the mountain that first day, but instead of alcohol they were drunk on knowledge. They were obnoxious, always talking just loud enough to drown Jesus out, not realizing that he never had to raise his voice to prove a point. Every word that left their mouth was an insult, and it was all Jesus could do to quell his anger and speak with reason.

He looked at the woman again, then at the Pharisees, searching their hearts for what he was afraid to see. He looked at how each of their hands held a stone to murder the woman who was no guiltier than they.

“If any of you is without sin, cast the first stone,” Jesus said. His eyes were downcast, trying so hard, just like his father, to look away. He bent down and continued to write, this time to ask God to save the woman’s life.

The time between his words and the Pharisees’ response seemed to take an eternity, but Jesus did not speak again. He was well aware of each man’s sordid past, the sins they kept to themselves. Every last one was guilty, holding stones meant for them more than the woman. But Jesus couldn’t be sure they’d admit this. Perhaps they’d throw their stones to get rid of their own guilt, distancing themselves from the accusations of their own hearts.

And then, a stone dropped.

The oldest Pharisee among them, a man in his late 90s, stared at the stone on the ground, as if he couldn’t believe he just held it. He was shaking, afraid of himself, of Jesus, of something bigger than his prejudices. Tears were forming in his eyes, and without a word he walked slowly back through the crowd and out of the temple court.

The other Pharisees looked at the stone on the ground. Slowly, each of them dropped their stones and got as far away from them as possible. Some of them looked confused, others were close to crying. A few nodded their heads at Jesus, while others refused to look anywhere but the ground. One paused briefly when he passed the accused woman, as if to speak, but then kept moving.

The woman was shaking, tears rolling down her face. “Thank you, thank you, God bless you,” she sobbed. Not a single Pharisee acknowledged her.

Through all of this, Jesus had been rocking back and forth on his heels, eyes shut tight as he drew prayers in the sand. He looked crazed, talking to himself in the corner while writing something unintelligible. A bystander, one of Jesus’ followers, found his ears

turning red from embarrassment and decided to take action. He cleared his throat, and attempted to nudge his foot into Jesus' crouched body. But because Jesus was squatting like a frog, he toppled right over and fell into two young women nearby.

"I'm sorry," Jesus said, embarrassed. They blushed in response.

Jesus stood up awkwardly, brushing himself off and continuing his apologies, this time to the increasingly-baffled crowd. The Pharisees were nowhere in sight.

"Where'd they go?" he asked. "Did no one condemn you?" Jesus was not making a point here; he was genuinely unsure of what was going on.

"No seriously," he said. "Did they not condemn you?" Looking Jesus in the eye for the first time, she noticed the sincere surprise in his expression. She also had the intuition that, during his mad raving on the ground, Jesus had already forgiven her and each one of the Pharisees. She only hoped that God would do the same.

"No sir, no one condemned me," she mumbled. She felt like she had known Jesus forever, but was nervous to speak to the one who was said to fix everything.

"Then neither do I," Jesus sighed. He seemed to say this to himself more than anyone else.

Barely anyone heard him, but the woman couldn't miss it. She was in disbelief, and had no better move to make than to leave before Jesus changed his mind. As she turned to walk away, Jesus added one more thing: "Please leave your life of sin." It came out as a plea, as if his heart would really break she didn't do it. The woman couldn't tell if he was saying it just to her, or to everyone in earshot.

She turned to Jesus with the conviction of someone who wanted to make a promise, but knew they couldn't keep it. Jesus sensed this in everyone he met. Looking around the

temple court, he saw the same look in all of his followers, all of his detractors, all of the curious and wandering and lost and lonely.

In that moment, Jesus knew that to do his father's work, he was going to have to endure more pain than he could ever bear. He just hoped that when everything was finished, he could reverse the descent. No other answer had been suitable before.

"It's all I have left to offer," God had said, unable to look Jesus in the eye at dinner one night.

*I don't understand life at all, but I don't say it is impossible that God may understand it a little.*

—Jules Renard

*death, explain yourself: part II*

1.

It started with a text.

We were at a concert. I planned everything three months in advance so that it was perfect. She was at school in California. She came home in May with two of her roommates. When they left a few days later, I had tickets to take her to Death Cab for Cutie.

We never saw them.

2.

I don't want to think about when it really started. When they came to the house in blue shirts, showed their badges, broke the news. When his wife fell down, screamed, I don't know. I didn't ask. How could I? She told the story up to that point, her reaction. She didn't need to go on. I wish she hadn't begun.

I know I am lying to myself. It really started in a parking lot, with the chest pain, the realization, the panic, the end. He was 51. He was too young. We all are.

## 3.

I have explained the story too many times. Once was too much. I can't imagine how many times they had to explain it to the family, the friends, the man who stopped his car that night and asked if everything was alright, why we were in the front yard at midnight. I want them to stop asking, or ask someone else. People are insensitive, or they are too sensitive to see outside of their own pain, their own confusion. I know I am.

That's why I couldn't stay.

It was Friday morning, the morning after. I took her to a doctor's appointment. I took her home, said I would be there for her. I would do my homework, stay out of the way.

"The best thing you can do for me now is to not be here. I know this is hard to hear, but one more person will just be more stress for my mom. I know you don't want to hear this, but you have to trust me."

I thought I knew what was best for her. But I couldn't handle it. After only a few minutes, I was in tears on the bathroom floor. An hour later, I was angry with people trying to ask questions, trying to talk about other things. They were being insensitive.

I was too.

## 4.

I left the house at 10:04 a.m. The green numbers glared at me when I turned my car on. Hadn't it been longer than two hours?

You asked me to leave around 8:30. I'm so sorry I didn't listen. I was doing what I thought you needed. Even if you don't know what you need, you need me to listen.

I slipped out the front door when more visitors walked in. Texted you to tell you I was leaving. Letting you know I'd be back when you needed me.

5.

It is Saturday night, and you still haven't needed me. Or maybe you have, but you won't ask. I have been thinking about all of the possible reasons why you wouldn't want me there and I am drowning. Am I not helping? Do you need to be alone? Do I care too much? Are you angry at me for still having my dad? For grieving yours when I am not as close as you?

This all makes me feel very selfish, but I feel helpless. I am supposed to take care of you, be there for you. How can I be there for you when I am not there?

6.

"We need you guys home right now. Don't rush. Don't speed. I can't say anything until you get here. But we need you home NOW. This isn't a joke... just leave the show and come straight home."

This was the text I got at the show. They probably didn't want her to see, to worry for an hour on the long drive home. But I didn't understand. I showed her immediately. She called her brother.

"Just come home," Ty said. "Don't ask questions. Just come home." I am assuming this is what he said. That is what the neighbor told me when Meggie passed the phone to me, when Ty passed the phone to the neighbor. Meggie was screaming. She wanted answers.

I did too, but more than that, I wanted people to stop looking. To realize that something terrible had happened, and they shouldn't stare. This might have been the wrong emotion to feel, but if people were looking, it only confirmed what we both knew was true: That everything had just changed.

7.

I deleted the text. I tried to erase the stares, but they haven't stopped. As long as we wear our mourning clothes, we will not remove the stench of grief.

8.

Earlier, when I said that it started in the parking lot, I was lying again. He had recently complained about having chest pains. Two or three days before all of this, he went to the doctor. "Indigestion," the doctor said.

Meggie and I were going to work out with him this summer, get him healthy again. Our preacher said he had wanted to do the same thing a few months before. Everyone feels guilty. No one is responsible. It doesn't matter. If you can't blame God for what you admit he is in control of, you have to point your quivering finger somewhere.

9.

On the way to the car, she asked me what happened. She thought they told me. I promised I didn't. I was looking for the car. She was walking the wrong direction. I wasn't sure there was a right way to go. She screamed when we arrived at the car, and I held her.

"Take me home," she said. "I need you to take me home right now." She punched me in the chest, but not hard. It was a desperate punch, a plea for me to pull myself together and be the man I feared I couldn't be.

10.

I asked for advice from men smarter than me who had gone through this. A man who lost his dad when he was 19. A man who lost both his parents when he was 27 to a car wreck. A man who lost his mom to a drawn-out disease no one knew about until it was too late. Some men who hadn't lost anyone, but knew how to speak in times like these.

As if times like these are normal.

They told me to be patient. To grieve. To be whatever she needed me to be. To do anything she asked. "What if she doesn't ask for anything?" I asked. I was afraid she wouldn't ask. Most of the time she doesn't.

But most of all, they told me to be strong. To hear that punch's plea. To continue reading from the Bible like I had that first night. Philippians. Paul was suffering, but he was at peace. Death is better, he promised.

What does Paul know?

What do they know?

What do any of us know about anything?

11.

I have used the f-word sparingly in my life. Never to curse. Only to sing along, or to quote.

After Meggie asked me to leave on Friday morning, I drove all the way back to the intersection before her house, needing to be there for her. I just had to. But she asked me to do something, and I knew better than to oppose her. I turned around.

Halfway down the highway, I screamed. At no one. At God. I wanted him to know I was angry. I used the f-word twice. Once, to let God know just how angry I was, that he got the first one I used in that context. The second time, to ask how long this highway was. It was never this long before.

12.

Why does every drive feel like the longest drive I have ever made?

13.

God, I know that you are in control, that you have a plan, that you will get us through this. It is very hard to believe that, however, when you are the one who put us in this awful mess in the first place. Do you expect us to trust someone who says they will give when they take and take and take?

Quit. You took him, and all you are giving us are things we don't want to deal with. Anger. People with questions. A single mother. Three kids without a dad. One of them is only 9. Explain this to little Jack, God. Tell me how you expect him to believe in you when you started this.

14.

I am not talking about Jack. I am talking about myself. I am trying very hard to mask my selfishness.

15.

When we arrived at the house, they were waiting in the front yard. Meggie wrestled with the door handle while I put the car in park. She was going to jump out too soon, hurt herself. I forgot to hit the brakes. It made a terrible noise. I didn't hear it, someone asked if my car was okay.

Nothing is okay.

"What is going on?" she screamed. "Why won't anyone tell me what is happening?" I will never forget the pain in her voice. She already knew, didn't she?

On the drive home, I asked if she wanted music, conversation, or silence. She wanted silence. I wanted conversation, because I was afraid there wouldn't be any more words to say at the end of this long drive. Maybe there already weren't.

I prayed anyway. I was afraid someone had died. I didn't say this. I told her not to think anything had happened until she knew for sure. I was just as convincing to her as I was to myself.

Her mother told us. "Daddy passed away."

"Whose daddy?" Meggie screamed. I wanted us to be back at the concert, listening to Death Cab for Cutie and enjoying the few hours of youth we had left.

I wanted this to not be happening.

16.

When she fell to the ground, I went to Ty. I gave him a hug. I said something, I don't know what. Was I supposed to go to Meggie on the ground? Too many hands were already on her. Maybe they weren't the right ones. Ty needed me, right? But I left him too soon, let go to be with Meggie.

17.

I'm going to lose the people I love, aren't I? I'm going to be forced to let go too soon, and there's not a thing I can do about it.

18.

She keeps telling me that she can't stop thinking he will walk back through the door. She knows that he won't, but she must believe in something.

I would never walk through her door again if it meant he could.

19.

On the ground, with her head in my lap, I said, "I know you don't want to hear this right now, but we need to pray."

Everything I say to other people I am saying to myself. I prayed to a God I was having a hard time believing in. I didn't want to talk to him, but I needed to. I am trying to convince myself I need to, so he doesn't get away with this.

20.

One of the men I talked to told me that in a situation like this, we can choose to run from God or run to God.

Shouldn't we run from the one stomping on us?

21.

O death, where is your sting?

The Bible says this somewhere, about how death has no power over us. But what if they meant that question in a different way, as in, "I'll take a sting over this weight that is crushing me, making it impossible to breathe"?

I know where your sting is, death. Just show me the stinger, and I will throw myself at you.

22.

After all of the visitors left on Friday, she called me and told me she couldn't breathe. She was tired of explaining, tired of pretending she was okay, tired of having to do anything. "I can't stand up," she said. "No one's asking you to," I assured her. I was crying very hard, trying not to think of how long it would be before she felt like doing anything. If that time would ever come.

23.

I have cried more tears than I thought were possible. Thursday and Friday, mostly.

Saturday, I made it through the first few hours, through the talks with those men, through the beginning of a paper that was due for finals. Then, out of nowhere, they came. They were flowing out of me, but also inside, where they clouded my brain and made me realize that it would be a long time before I stopped crying, before I could stop feeling everything all at once.

## 24.

I asked one of the men, the one who lost his dad when he was 19, like Meggie, what to read in the Bible. He said Jacob. Jacob was on the other side of the river, removed from his family, suffering. He was going to meet his brother Esau, sure that Esau was going to kill him.

On the other side of the river, on the way to meet Esau, he wrestled God. All night. In the morning, God blessed Jacob for wrestling him and surviving.

“You guys are in the wilderness right now. And it is midnight. You are a long way from 6 a.m. when the blessing will come. But it will. The important thing is, when you run to God, that doesn’t necessarily mean running to him to thank him. Sometimes it means wrestling him. And that is okay. Eventually daybreak will come, and you will find the blessing.”

Well, I have wrestled with God, but I am still angry. My blessing might come long after 6 a.m.

## 25.

Saturday night, she finally needed me. “I want to watch a movie. I don’t want you to console me. I don’t want a hug. I just want to watch a movie.” She did not have to say any of this.

“I know,” I said. I finally understood. I ripped the movies from the shelf, forgetting which ones were sad, which ones to avoid. I wanted to give her options, to give her just the right thing.

We watched *A Bug's Life*. It made me feel small, like Flick trying to fix everything but making a bigger mess. I had my arm around her. She fell asleep.

I felt okay for the first time. I clung to it, as I knew it was fleeting.

26.

After the doctor's appointment, I gave her a tiara I won for her at an arcade earlier that week. “I know the timing is bad, but I thought I could remind you that you're my princess.”

“Your timing is always perfect,” she smiled.

27.

The man who lost his mother unexpectedly said he knew how hard it must be for me, knowing my compulsion to fix everything, knowing I could not anymore. It became clear. “I think God is trying to teach me not to lean on myself,” I admitted. “I am a very self-sufficient person, but that is wrong.”

Okay God, I learned the lesson.

Bring him back now.

28.

I am trying to focus on Meggie's emotions. In this way, I don't have to imagine what her family is going through. I cannot bear to think of the life of a single mother, in love with a man she will not see until she goes too. To wonder if she wants to go now. To listen to Jack say he does not want to hear stories about his dad right now, as if that will erase him.

To hear him say his dad will not see anything they accomplish in life. To know that Ty is withdrawing into himself, bottling every horrible feeling into his chest. To fear the day he explodes.

I cannot think of these things, so I think about Meggie.

“She needs you, and you only,” her mother said. “She needs to watch a movie and stop talking. Make her.”

“You got it,” I replied. “But what do you need?”

She repeated my instructions for Meggie.

29.

If none of us know what we need, how do we ask?

30.

Of all the people I talked to, my dog was the most helpful. She sat next to me, and licked my tears away as they fell down my face.

Are we all so helpless that we can do no more than dry each other’s tears? Or have we even tried something so simple yet?

31.

Sunday morning, at church, they weren’t there. I understood. I dropped a stuffed animal at the house on my way.

Ty’s best friend, Emilyann, walked out when worship started. Crying. Slammed a door. I followed.

“I can’t worship,” she said. “I have no reason to.”

“Me either,” I said. “I’m not asking you to. I’m angry, and I can’t sing. I am going to sit there in silence, and I need you to sit next to me.”

I am Ty and Emilyann's youth intern. I should have said something about trusting God in the hard times, but I chose honesty.

32.

Meggie was not at church the week before. It was my last Sunday to teach before I began an internship at another church. I was mad at her for not being there. It's funny how small things seem in retrospect, how selfish they become.

An ex-boyfriend gave her a picture that still hangs on her wall. I cannot stand looking at it. I hate that picture now more than ever. I don't know why, I might feel like someone is intruding, trying to remind Meggie of things that ended up hurting her.

I am trying hard not to be that intruder.

33.

I have wrestled with death and I doubt it has any blessings to offer. I may be angry with God, but I feel like I am just wrestling death, who has nothing but grief to give me. I can do nothing to God, but death would be wise to stay clear of me right now.

This, of course, means nothing. death will do what it wants to me. I am just trying to sound tough.

I am confusing tough with strong. Everything confuses me.

34.

Sunday, after viewing the body, she called.

"I need to see you."

She met me at the restaurant where I had just eaten. She was sick of being asked how she was, sick of being told "I'm sorry," sick of no one treating her normally.

I treated her normally. We were able to laugh about other things.

We needed that. Or at least I did.

35.

During worship on Sunday, the kids were led in a song called “My God Is So Big.” As the kids sang, I felt anger welling up inside of me. “My God is so big, so strong and so mighty,” they exclaimed.

I was trying not to be bitter, but I wanted to say, “A little too big, wouldn’t you say?”

36.

Half of my prayers have been screamed, attempts to shake God awake and make him answer for this.

They don’t make me feel better. The whispered ones seem to do more, though I feel I am submitting to someone I can’t stand.

Meggie later told me that she could not pray. Every time she tries, nothing comes out. I try to pray harder for her, but I don’t know if it’s working. Perhaps our faith should be in our eternal father, but when he takes our earthly one it must be very hard to want any father besides the one we can’t have.

37.

We talked about the Good Samaritan in church, and I felt a knocking on my heart. The preacher said that we were the light when we loved one another. Eventually, I thought, I will have to return to God. Eventually, I will have to let light in.

Does that make me a burned-out firefly, unaware that the light I am seeking is within me? That I am looking everywhere for something that has been following me, attached to an end I can’t see? You should have placed the bulb in front of my face, so that it blinded me, and opened my eyes for the first time.

38.

It has taken me this long before I could say his name.

His name is Jess. He was once a radio host, something I always wanted to know more about from him. He owned a water utilities company with his dad. He was independent, did everything on his own. Meggie takes after him.

He was funny, full of love and jokes.

I did not know him as well as the rest of the family, but I could see bits of him in Meggie, in her brothers. The longest conversation we had was a month before he passed. I needed to interview an entrepreneur, and he was glad to talk to me. I only needed thirty minutes; we talked for two hours.

He talked about his great-grandfather, his grandfather, himself. They all set out on their own to succeed by their own terms. As he told the story, I was enthralled. Here was my girlfriend's pride, her courage, her strength, revealed before my very eyes. I am grateful for the memory. It carries a weight that the others don't, because of its purpose and because it was the last one I'd ever have with him.

39.

She said something about the things they'd never do together. I keep hearing her say, "He'll never walk me down the aisle." I have tried so hard to block it out, but I can't come up with any good answer about who will do it now.

But mostly, I can't get the pain in her voice out of my head.

Emilyann told me that Ty said the hardest part was seeing the news broken to Meggie. She collapsed in a heap on the lawn like a puppet dropped by its master, no longer

guided by the one who led it. When Meggie's dad died, part of her went with him. She couldn't bear the weight of standing alone.

I am trying to say that I agree with Ty.

40.

I should have told Jess "thank you," but I am saying it now and believing it is not too late. I know that his wife and kids are who they are, in part, because of him. It is an honor to know them, and to love them.

They love me very much. I hope he knew how much they loved him.

41.

"One thing we can do," a man prayed at worship on Sunday, "is to honor those who have passed by waking up and living our lives for them every single day."

I am taking solace in that, as hard as this still is.

42.

I am not sure what I believe about Heaven. I have heard people say that when someone passes, they are already there with God.

Is it true, God?

I can't say, but if they are already there with God, and God is eternal, existing in the past, present, and future, then doesn't that mean that we too are already in Heaven with God, with Jess?

I don't know. I certainly don't feel like I am already in Heaven. But it's a thought I don't mind entertaining.

43.

When Meggie called on Saturday night to watch a movie, I told my mother, "I am going. She wants to watch a movie."

My mother has been very worried about me. She said, "Ben, no."

"Mom. Don't." I snapped. I wasn't trying to hurt her, but I needed to be with Meggie.

My mom cares too much. I know, because I do too.

44.

I read the story of the Good Samaritan at church before the preacher spoke on it. "Today I stand before you, and I am on the side of the road," I said. "I can't tell you how much it means for you to be there for me."

I am not saying this to sound like a hero, to sound like I was strong enough to stand before them and thank them. I am hurting, and I wanted them to know what they were doing for me. I might be angry with God, but I am not angry with the people he has put in my life to love me. They are showing me a light I can't see in myself.

I think that is the most I can give God credit for at this point.

45.

When they told Jack, I searched the house so that I could talk to him. At 9 years old, he took it the best.

I hugged him, told him I loved him. "It's okay, dude," he piped up. "He can see our dog Delilah, and his grandparents, and in Heaven he doesn't have to be fat."

Tears came streaming down my face. "That is a good way to look at it, Jack."

"Just think positively, dude," he assured me. "You'll live a good life."

46.

After church, I sat alone while everyone began to gather their things and leave. I had nothing to gather but myself. I cried, and I was left alone for a few minutes. A man I did not know eventually sat down next to me.

"I felt compelled to sit next to you," he said gently. "I don't know what you're going through, but I have a boy that I think is about your age. How old are you?"

"21," I said.

"I thought so," he sighed. "He's 22. I know what it's like to be at that age and feel a lot of things. Unfortunately my son has made some choices and gone down a path where we can't follow him. We don't speak to him because of some of those choices, but perhaps you could tell me sometime what you're going through and then maybe I could understand my son better."

I don't know why, but in this moment, I felt a chance to light my bulb again. Or I just felt comfort in his voice. "Sure," I said. "I'd be happy to."

"Well," he sighed again, but relieved this time, "You're in my prayers. Don't go through this alone. There's too many people around you to do anything by yourself."

Sir, I don't know you, but I am going to listen to you. Perhaps you are God disguised, delivering a message I might actually hear.

47.

I am not as sad for myself now as I am for others. His parents are still living. His father, Jess Sr., has Alzheimer's. Every day he will wake up and ask about Jess, and Ann will have to tell him again. The moment of knowing he is gone will repeat for them every day until the day when there is no need for knowing anymore.

This will be hard for both of them, and that is why I know my heart has not yet finished breaking.

48.

I don't know why we are here; I only know that death is always in the way of some peace we can't reach. Do we still believe peace is there somewhere, that it is reaching for us when we cannot anymore?

49.

In time, there will be a light. If I convince myself of this, I can convince Meggie.

Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." I cannot tell you how many times I say this each day, waiting to believe it.

50.

death, keep your secrets. I can't bear to know them now, and someday I won't need to.

51.

God, you must know what you are doing, and I do not. I am not saying this is okay, but I get it.

Keep working, and I will keep trying to see.

*What if we've been trying to get to where we've always been?*

—Manchester Orchestra

### *For Heaven's Sake*

Heaven help us if Heaven is anything like we imagine it. Jesus left much to the imagination about the place so at some point we had to take it upon ourselves to write the house listing: *5 bedrooms, 4 bath, totally renovated and expanded in 2010, 24,000 square feet, wine basement, large pond in backyard, housekeeping provided, a mile each way from other houses provides complete seclusion from noisy neighbors, 6-car garage, porch and patio, Jacuzzi, 2 swimming pools (and room for another), large wraparound driveway, lush gardens, etc.*

Our descriptions of Heaven expand to include each desire we cannot fulfill in this life and exclude each burden we carry in the here and now. Is your car a piece of junk? Store up for yourself treasures in Heaven, and when the day comes you can drive your Ferrari all the way to the Pearly Gates. Valet services will be provided, and there's no extra cost, because there's no money to speak of. Everything is free in Heaven, but you will have bags of money just in case. "In God We Trust" never meant so much before.

God may be in the details, but could you be a little more specific about Heaven? We have finely-tuned each of our individual specifications and no one else gets to impede on our blueprints for happiness. If a married couple has different views on where the fireplace will go in Heaven, they can easily live next door to each other in their own mansions. There is no trouble in driving your assorted sports cars to visit your husband on days when the guys aren't over to drool over his man-haven.

In our Heaven, everybody wins. It's the event of eternity.

But in the end, isn't our Heaven just one big flashing advertisement for junk we don't need and wouldn't want when we saw it? Our Heaven is a rap song that forgot the meaning behind the possessions we brag about owning. Instead of a story about liberating ourselves from poverty, prejudice, and persecution, we just tell the story about what our liberation affords. Somewhere along the way, everything we gained we could hold. We hang our hats on our plaques, hang those on the walls of our dreamed mansions, and shove everything else into boxes in the garage for the day we know we'll need the stuff again.

It's no wonder why it's harder to believe in God these days. We traded his Heaven for our own, unaware that we sleepwalk through too much of life to know the difference between a dream and a daze of secondhand garbage. We may confuse God for the bearded father figure dressed in all white atop the clouds, but we also confuse him for the trendsetting model wearing fashions we'll die without or sell our souls to have. Welcome to our disillusioned Heaven. Will that be debit or credit?

This is why I have found it harder to believe in Heaven the older I get. The exaggerated tales of a mystical land with wealth and riches became stories by the campfire for my generation. We listened intently and believed it for a minute, allowed ourselves to

get caught in the moment. But then, we dismissed it when one of the older boys made fun of us for the twinkle in our eyes. We laid awake staring at the stars wondering what the reality was. How could cars, clothes, and money free us in that world when they hold us down in this world? We whisper this question in the dark, hoping the silence will whisper back, but it never does because we know it doesn't have to. Our questions answer us, and we grow up disappointed and disheartened.

Yet we still get caught up in that same empty story our ancestors told us, and then taught us to avoid. We watched people get wealth and wanted it for ourselves. Then we watched them get old and die alone, but we couldn't get past the first part of the story when everything seemed so perfect. Some legends are traps set so perfectly that we fall in and don't climb out simply because the view is better looking up.

Or maybe we hang onto our Heaven for lack of better stories to tell. If we have no evidence of the real thing, can't our imagined Heavens become truer than the reality? We repeat and rehearse the lines so many times that we start to believe in the Heavens we create, the gods of our own liking. Pass the s'mores please; I want something sweet.

I can't help but believe that Paul was the first to fall for it. Throughout his letters, he wrote of the coming Heaven, confident that it would be there within weeks. "We who are still alive and are left will be caught up together in the clouds to meet." Paul scribbled this to Thessalonica, so excited that he went through several papyrus before he had a legible draft. He was so sure that Heaven was coming before some people would die. Paul must have been crushed when death beat Heaven to his doorstep.

It wasn't even that Paul had imagined seeing a "Coming Soon" sign hanging from the clouds. Jesus had said that some people would see the kingdom before they died, but Paul

must have misinterpreted this to wrongly predict the timing of Heaven. And though Paul never had children, we became the children and grandchildren of his bad bet, generations and generations of people with our heads in the clouds and our feet in our mouths.

It is as if we are all standing at the bottom of the ladder with Jacob, staring up in anticipation for the angels to come down. The sun blinds us in the meantime, and we miss everything below. Did we forget Jacob was dreaming? Did we assume he was not dreaming of Heaven here on Earth but dreaming of Heaven in Heaven? I wonder if we took our heads out of the clouds for two minutes if we could grasp that our feet are planted on the ground for a reason. In the same place where Jacob stood and Paul stood and Jesus stood. That must mean some small part of Heaven is here to hold. We could be searching for buried treasure that was following us under our feet the entire time. Our eyes aren't open if we only look up and not around.

Jesus told a parable about an underground Heaven like this: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field." He scooped some dirt from the ground and let it rain through his fingers like it was precious to hold but better to release. "When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field." Staring off into the distance, Jesus seemed to be looking for that man in his happiness, knowing he was not here in the crowd listening. Everyone standing there followed Jesus' eyes to see what he saw, and missed what he said.

But what was he saying? If a man found Heaven hidden on Earth, why did Jesus later leave to prepare a place for us? I realize that parables are just stories, but the point of the parable seems to be that it's possible for humans to find Heaven and even acquire it if they get rid of everything else.

In another story, the Pharisees ask Jesus, “When is this quote-unquote kingdom of God coming?” The Pharisees didn’t believe in the Heaven that everyone had gone halfway crazy talking about. They were content to be right about everything, and it wasn’t long after this that believers in Heaven became less crazy and more like the Pharisees too.

Jesus replied, “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you.” He pointed at various spots in the sky as if to indicate where Heaven wouldn’t be found, then placed his palm on a Pharisee’s chest gently but firmly to indicate where Heaven was. The Pharisee slapped Jesus’ hand away and brushed the invisible dirt from his tunic. He turned away with the other Pharisees, laughing as they pointed every which way where Heaven supposedly wasn’t.

This time, instead of a parable where a man discovered Heaven somewhere on Earth, Jesus spoke directly. He told them that a person discovered Heaven within themselves. He talked and talked about things no one had yet considered, and didn’t stop for questions. He was giving them the answers, plain and simple. And as if the disciples weren’t confused enough, staring at each other’s chests in anticipation of Heaven popping out of someone at any moment, Jesus began to speak of the days of the Son of Man.

“Just like in Noah’s time, so also will it be then,” Jesus proclaimed. He was speaking of the past and future as if all things were connected, all moments sewn together by a steady hand. “People were caught up in eating, drinking, and marrying when Noah got on the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all.” He spoke matter-of-factly, conveying truths he found obvious to the lost crowd.

Before anyone could slow him down, Jesus pressed on. “And just like in Lot’s time, when people ate and drank and bought and sold and planted and builded,” Jesus paused to take a breath, “Lot left Sodom and fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed every last one of them.” The disciples knew these stories all too well. Some could rehearse them in their sleep, but were beginning to think they had heard the stories wrong. What had they been missing?

What they had been missing, and I think this because I too miss it so often, was the fact Noah and Lot had physically reached Heaven by escaping the hell around them. With Earth about to be destroyed, the ark was Heaven to Noah and his family. They would be surrounded by death and desolation, yet they would be safe in the company of one another and some lucky animals. With Sodom about to face the same fate as the Earth a few years before, the escape from Sodom was Heaven to Lot and his family. Jesus may have been speaking metaphorically, but there is a Heaven on Earth for those willing to step onto the ark or flee their surrounding hells.

And so for all of my doubts about faith, for all of my questions that seem to find no answers, for all of my criticisms that outweigh convictions, I believe in Heaven. I believe in a Heaven after we die, but even more than that I believe in a Heaven right here and now where my feet are planted firmly on its soil. I will keep my head in the clouds, but I will bring what I find down to right where I am. Just like Noah and Lot did, just like rappers who know what their wealth really means, just like Jacob when he dreamed right here, just like Jesus when he revealed where Heaven was like a secret he couldn’t keep.

So I propose a new Heaven for the cynical generation of kids who don’t believe in anything they don’t see: Let’s open our eyes. Let’s build our own arks, flee our Sodom, free

ourselves from Egypt, leave our lion's den, exit the belly of the fish, rise from our graves. Let's make a new Heaven, or get back to the old one. Dream up ladders to Heaven, and wake up to climb them. Find Heaven buried just below the surface, and sell absolutely everything for it. Redecorate these mansions, or tear them down and start over. Tell a new story, one that rings with the truths of eternity and the warm feeling of nostalgia for a story that's been told over and over but never loses its magic, never dwindles with the fire after legends are done being told.

I am not saying that we become God and create Heaven as if we are the authors of the universe; I am saying that we should acknowledge God in ourselves and create Heaven as if the author of the universe handed us a pen and asked us to etch out Heaven into the archives of time.

We have told the story of Heaven without God for too long; it's time to tell one that finally includes that great mystery we seek.

Like Jacob, I have dreamt a union between Heaven and Earth. I have climbed that ladder and I have descended that ladder to find that God is both here and there, and always at work. The less I know about God, the more I am enveloped by his glory. It is as if all of us humans are love letters sent from God himself. We were written on his heart and delivered to this earth in hopes that we would find our home, our Heaven, within the truest worship I will ever witness, and that must be relationship.

I know this, because I went to Heaven once.

I was working for a church this past summer, at the height of my doubts but the beginning of new faith, and we took the youth group to Maine. About twenty years ago, our church planted a church there. It is a small congregation, made up of less than fifty people.

It makes them more of a family, loving and dysfunctional as any church should be. Our youth group frequently visits the church in Maine to do local service projects for the people there.

The week we were in Maine, a group of our teens worked at a home for the elderly. They put up a fence, built a garden, repainted rooms, and spent a large portion of their time playing bingo and singing with the residents. On the last day to visit the elderly home, I got a chance to go and witness the sight of beautiful people in their final years as they sang songs they remembered long after their memory had failed them. It was nothing short of a miracle.

Cecil, a man late into his nineties, was responsible for my trip to Heaven. He rode into the common area in one of those big wheelchairs that announce how sick a person is as it bumps into chairs and doorframes. He operated the wheelchair with a little joystick on the right side, the little bit of control he had over the machine that guided him. While the group sang, Cecil sat quiet at a table he had parked himself at, away from everyone else. He stared at the ground, stared out the window, or just closed his eyes to stare at nothing.

Our teenagers began singing "The Old Rugged Cross," an old gospel hymn that I've been singing since the pews in church were taller than me. The song is slow and thick, recalling the day Jesus died for us in such melancholia that it feels like you were really there when it happened. With two distant generations singing it together, you marvel at how some stories are passed down without losing their weight. The chorus to the song goes like this: "So I'll cherish the old rugged cross/Till my trophies at last I lay down/I will cling to the old rugged cross/And exchange it someday for a crown."

As we sang “The Old Rugged Cross,” Cecil began to cry. It started with a few tears, so few no one would notice them even if they were watching his eyes for them. But then, seemingly in an instant, the tears began to pour. The nearly lifeless body of Cecil awoke in shakes and sobs as years of pain flooded through the gates of his heart. Everyone kept singing. No one knew if one of us should stop to comfort him.

A nurse finally walked to Cecil’s side and dropped to his level. She was a young woman who had been full of energy all day, clearly in love with her work and undeterred by its difficulty. Leaning close, she asked, “Are you okay, Cecil?”

“I miss her so much,” Cecil sobbed. “This was her favorite song. I want to see her. I want to be with her. She loved this song. I miss her, I miss her, I miss her.”

Cecil’s broken voice could have overpowered our singing it was so loud. But it didn’t. Everything from his words to his tone to his deep, wounded cries wove into the song as if the songwriter had written the words and melody after hearing Cecil’s melancholy first. We sang louder, our voices cracking as we choked up.

“I miss her so much,” Cecil continued to repeat.

“I know you do, Cecil,” the nurse responded. She maintained her composure. “But you know what? Your wife can hear this from Heaven, and she’s listening to it with you right now. And she’s waiting for you, Cecil. She’ll be there when you get there.”

“I want to go now,” Cecil said. I doubt a dry eye could be found in the room. Cecil did not just cherish the old rugged cross; he clung to it with all that was left of him. He had laid his trophies down time and time again, and he was begging for his crown. We knew his story without hearing it, because at some point we had all lived versions of it, however small or large. We have all been through our own hells, and we have all longed for Heaven

to come down to us finally. One of the teenagers had been forced into religion before she was ready. Some of the girls had been judged so harshly by the youth group in the past they had only recently given church another chance. One of the guys didn't know his father.

And me? I had spent three years of college trying to find God, running from God, and falling deeper into doubt and out of faith. At the end of that lonely journey, I clung to the cross not because I understood it, but because I knew it. I was ready to lay down the sins and fears and questions and confusion and pride and depression. I wanted a crown that I couldn't hold but I could claim for myself. I wanted a God bigger than what my mind could contain. I didn't find him in some new answer, some ending that said, "And they all lived happily ever after."

I found him in Cecil. Here was a man surrounded by hell in his loneliness and longing, but hearing how much he loved his wife, I could tell he had been in Heaven with her. I could tell her presence in his life meant everything to him, beyond any dream that money could afford, and that when he was with her he felt Heaven all around him. I could imagine the way he wooed her as a teenager, could see the passion of their youth revived over and throughout their years, could feel the tender love that comes with age. When she died, he must have given up on this life, on this world and all its hell. He must have prayed to God to take him every single day after she passed so that he could return to his Heaven. This time it would last. Cecil knew it, and he couldn't wait, and he felt it with all of the life he had left.

He felt Heaven so much that he made me feel it deep within myself. I felt Heaven in music that didn't resolve, music that told me I wasn't alone in not knowing anything, music that found freedom at the end of suffering. I felt Heaven in the people in my life who loved

me long before I loved myself or knew how to love them back equally. I felt Heaven in people who had fallen so deeply in love with something that everyone around them felt Heaven's presence beating out of their chests.

I felt Heaven absolutely everywhere.

I once believed that Heaven must be greater than anything any of us could ever imagine, and then one day I didn't believe that. One day I felt a love so great in my heart that I believed that Heaven was exactly how we could imagine it. These tiny glimpses of pure love that strike my heart, send a chill down my spine, and bring a tear to my eye are Heaven right here and right now on this Earth.

I can't help but imagine that these glances will one day stretch themselves over the hands of time so that when our clocks tick into eternity, Heaven will move within each and every second as we cling to that old rugged cross.

## *Notes*

I used the New International Version of the Bible when quoting it, paraphrasing it, or interpreting it.

### “Breaking Up With God”

1. I originally wrote this piece as a song by the same name, but I had more to say.
2. “Knock and the door shall be open unto you” is from Matthew 7:7-8.
3. The line “God was speaking in tongues” is a biblical idea from the standpoint of biblical figures speaking in tongues, not that God (necessarily) spoke in tongues.
4. The line “I was losing the beat of the drum” is a spin on Paul’s line “If I...have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal” from 1 Corinthians 13.
5. The line “in the mouth of a lion, the belly of a fish” is an allusion to Daniel and Jonah.
6. The line “he was written there from the start” is an allusion to John 1:1, which says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

7. The line “waiting for my ears to ear” comes from Jesus’s oft-repeated phrase, “He who has ears to ear, let him ear.”
8. The line “I wouldn’t stop fighting for the one who fought for me first” came to me after spending some time reading Romans, where Paul argues that one does not keep sinning after Christ has died for their sins but rather becomes a slave to Christ/alive in Christ.
9. Much of the paragraph that starts “I find it easier to relay the facts...” is based on 1 Corinthians 13.
10. The line “I did not understand love, but I knew it. And its name was God” comes from 1 John 4:8.
11. The line “he is me and I am him” is an allusion to the Holy Spirit within us. The intention is not to put me on level with God, only to say that God is within us.
12. The lines starting “to have and to hold...” are based on traditional marriage vows.
13. The lines starting with “I would cheat on him, but he’d forgive” are an allusion to Hosea.
14. The line “I would try to leave this world, but he’d put me back on it” is not about resurrection or reincarnation; it’s an allusion to a failed suicide. I often hear people say that failed suicides are God’s way of telling people that he is not done with them on earth; I do not tend to agree with this, but it is an interesting thought.
15. The paragraph starting with the line “I wrote to him, called him...” is based on Romans 7. The line “what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” is taken directly from that chapter.

16. The line “...telling me that nothing would separate me from his love” is based on Romans 8:38-39.

The As Cities Burn line before “In a Fish” is from the song “Contact” on their 2007 album *Come Now Sleep*.

#### “In a Fish”

1. The story of Jephthah and his daughter is found in Judges 11:29-40.
2. The story of Abraham almost sacrificing his son is found in Genesis 22:1-19.
3. The story of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel is found in Genesis 29:14-30:24.
4. The story of Jonah is found in Jonah.

The Circa Survive line before “The Hole in Everything” is from the song “Kicking Your Crosses Down” on their 2007 album *On Letting Go*.

#### “The Hole in Everything”

1. The story of Adam and Eve is found in Genesis 2 and 3. Most of my narrative is not based on the events in these chapters, but what I imagine would happen to their marriage after the Fall in Genesis 3.
2. I imagined the turmoil between Adam and Eve from God’s words in Genesis 3:16-19, where God tells Eve, “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” God also tells Adam, “Cursed is the ground because of you.” Since the Bible does not tell us anything about Adam and Eve after God’s speech, except that they are kicked out of the Garden of Eden and have children, I crafted the details of what God’s words would mean for their relationship. This part of the story is perhaps the least Biblically-based, but I feel like it fits within the details given in Genesis 3.

3. The story of Aaron, Moses, and the golden calf is found in Exodus 32. Most of this narrative is based on the events in this chapter.
4. The parts about Moses' speech impediment and Aaron speaking for him are based on Exodus 3 and 4.
5. The "extensive list of rules God wanted the Israelites to follow" is found in Exodus 20-31.
6. The story of Judas betraying Jesus is found in Matthew 26:14-16, Mark 14:10-11, and Luke 22:3-6.
7. The Bible makes no reference to Jesus going to Heaven during the three days he was dead; I just needed a way to allow him to think during this time.
8. The line "who could say that Jesus practiced what he preached about hanging around the lowliest of characters" is a reference to passages like Matthew 9:9-13, where Jesus states that he came to heal the sick, not the healthy.
9. The line "They told him to try telling parables, but Judas was never good at endings" is not based on any story that Judas told, but his actual ending of suicide.
10. The line "They encouraged him to embrace the power of knowing Jesus" is based on many passages in the New Testament that refer to what comes with knowing Jesus.
11. The line "[Jesus] would talk about preparing a new office for them in Heaven" comes from John 14:1-4, among other places.
12. The line about "exclusive hangouts with Peter, James, and John" is in reference to passages like Matthew 17:1-13 and 26:36-46, where Peter, James, and John are the only apostles with Jesus.

13. The line that states that Peter, James, and John were always at the center of “a mistake being made, or a conversation about the greatest” is based on Peter’s constant mistakes throughout the Gospels, and the conversation between James, John, and Jesus about sitting on the right and left of Jesus in Mark 10:35-45.
14. The lines about “Judas’s betrayal of himself” are a reference to his suicide found in Matthew 27:1-10.

The Brand New line before “death, explain yourself” is from the song “At the Bottom” on their 2009 album *Daisy*.

“death, explain yourself”

1. The Walt Whitman line from *Leaves of Grass* comes from stanza 6.
2. The Brand New song is called “Limousine,” from their 2006 album *The Devil and God Are Raging Inside Me*. It would be appropriate to listen to the whole album while reading this piece, as I often turn to the album in moments of grief.
3. The story about Cheyanne is used with her permission.
4. The Death Cab for Cutie song, “What Sarah Said,” is from their 2005 album *Plans*.
5. The story about my vice principal is used with his permission.
6. Section 12, about wanting to crash my car, came from thoughts explored in *Wish You Were Here*.
7. The portions that mention (briefly and indirectly) my doubts about Heaven are a topic I explore further in *For Heaven’s Sake*.

The Kevin Devine line before “Wish You Were Here” is from the song “Tomorrow’s Just Too Late” on his 2009 album *Brother’s Blood*.

“Wish You Were Here”

1. I learned of the phrase “there is no place where God is not” in Dr. Middleton’s Africa and the African Diaspora class at TCU in the fall of 2010.
2. The line “optimistic believers around the world deem it impossible to separate ourselves from God, convinced that neither doctrine nor diction can explain God away” is a spin on Romans 8:38-39, where he says that he is convinced that nothing “can separate us from the love of God that is Christ Jesus our Lord.” He uses the formula “neither [this] nor [that]” throughout the passage.
3. I learned that there are many societies without words or concepts for religion in many of my religion courses at TCU.
4. The line “why we talk about saving souls but not about saving lives” is based on the words of William Booth, one of the founders of the Salvation Army: “Why all this apparatus of temples and meet-houses to save men from perdition in a world which is to come, while never a helping hand is stretched out to save them from the inferno of their present life?”
5. The line about the “body being a temple” is a reference to 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.
6. The line about Jesus “exaggerating when he said it was adulterous to look at a woman lustfully” is a reference to Matthew 5:28.
7. The line about Jesus spending “a lot of time trying to get away from people to pray” is based on many verses in the Gospels where Jesus goes off in private to pray.
8. The line about Jesus never getting privacy because people “kept finding him and intruding” is based on many verses that say Jesus went off to pray by himself are followed by people finding him.

9. The prayer that Jesus made to not die on the cross is found in Matthew 26:39, Mark 14:36, and Luke 22:42.
10. The part about Elijah finding God in the silence is found in 1 Kings 19:9-18.
11. I learned about the Islamic view on the Holy Trinity in Dr. Middleton's Africa and the African Diaspora class.
12. The line "a God that can be narrowed into bullet-points on a PowerPoint is no God at all" is based on the Dear and the Headlights song "Try" from their 2007 album *Drunk Like Bible Times*. The song says: "Then in comes the church with the answers/Ah, bless me with those tired acronyms/They look good on the overhead slide/They're saving lives/Works every time."
13. The story of the rich young man is found in Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-30, and Luke 18:18-30. I stop following the basic story when I imagine the man's words to Jesus when Jesus tries to look in his closet.
14. The line "You want to be an adult, but you've yet to leave your childish ways" is based on 1 Corinthians 13:11.
15. The line from God "I just don't think you have the full picture, and I can't just tell you what you have to learn from yourself" is based on 1 Corinthians 13:12, where Paul says that we only know in part but will someday know fully.
16. The line "If the gate to destruction is so wide, why does it feel narrower the longer we walk down on it?" is based on Matthew 7:13-14.
17. The line "The tongue truly is the rudder that steers the whole ship" is based on James 3:4-5.
18. The line "What shall I say, then?" is almost a direct quote from Romans 7:7.

19. The line “I know that nothing good lives in me” is a direct quote from Romans 7:18.
20. The line “Like Jonah, like Moses, like the rich young man, like Adam, like Peter, like everybody who ever lived, I know I am no good for God, so I do what it takes to get away” is based on each of their stories. Jonah runs from God, Moses tries to tell God he is not the man for the job, the rich young man walks away, Adam hides from God, and Peter denies Jesus.
21. The line “I hate everything, I do not love a single thing” is an allusion, in a way, to Romans 7:14-20.
22. The line “I know that wherever I am, he is there if I want him to be” is based on the Kevin Devine line preceding this piece.
23. The story of God looking for Adam and Eve is found in Genesis 3:6-9.
24. The line about God “trying so hard to bring me back to him” is an allusion to Hosea.
25. The lines “I’m seeking out that voice, but I haven’t found it yet. I’m knocking on every wrong door until I find the right one. I’m asking all of the wrong questions until I get the right answer” are based on Matthew 7:7-12.

The line before “God Rests His Soul” is from *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck.

#### “God Rests His Soul”

1. The line “God had not taken a vacation since the seventh day of Earth’s existence” is based on Genesis 2:2-3.
2. The line “Matthew didn’t have a chance to budget expenses for the trip” is based on Matthew being a tax collector.
3. The line “with all of his son’s talk about the first being last” is based on passages like Matthew 20:16, where Jesus says that the first shall be last.

4. The line “God didn’t notice a three-hour delay, as he lacked any notion of time,” in addition to other lines about him not noticing lapses in time, are based on theories of God existing outside of time.
5. The line “since humans had made his job actual work” is a reference to the Fall.
6. The line “He was finding it harder and harder to relate to humans” is based on ideas that though humans were made in God’s image, that might not hold up after the Fall.
7. The line “minor annoyances stacking up on Earth as they did in Heaven” is based on the Lord’s Prayer found in Matthew 6:9-13, when Jesus says, “on earth as it is in heaven.”
8. The scene where God discusses Heaven’s readiness with Jesus is based on Jesus saying that he was going to prepare a place in John 14:3.
9. The line from Jesus, “Heaven isn’t ready until they’re ready. Its whole design is premised upon them building it right from where they are” is based on Jesus talking about the kingdom of God being within people, found in Luke 17:20-37.
10. The line “God...kept an inkling of hope that maybe his son had found yet another way out for people” is based on Jesus dying for the sins of humans.
11. The line “from trash we make treasure” is based on a lot of Biblical passages that talk about God using the weak to his glory.
12. The line “daydreamed about making the sun stand still again” is based on Joshua 10.
13. The line “giving them an excuse to say that God only appears as himself” is based on the numerous times in the Bible where God appears in different forms, yet so many of our modern views are premised around not believing that God reveals himself anymore.

14. The line “He would have to give a straight answer, something he loathed” is based on the many times in the Bible when God is vague in his responses.

The verse from Genesis before “The Descent” is not about a specific man, but all men.

#### “The Descent”

1. Part 1, “In the Beginning,” is based on Genesis 6. It does not specifically say that God caused the flood because of lust, but the story says that men began marrying any women they chose (6:1-2) and God thus limited their lives to 120 years (3). Right after this, verse 4 says that God saw “how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.” Then God causes the flood (7). From this, I make the creative leap to use lust as God’s reason for starting over.
2. The subheading “In the Beginning” is a quote from Genesis 1:1.
3. The story of Cain killing Abel is found in Genesis 4.
4. The line “As more men came into being and had daughters, those men looked at other men’s daughters...” is based on Genesis 6:1-2.
5. The line “I would lie with her in a heartbeat” is based on the common Biblical euphemism for sex.
6. The line “I’d like to gain some knowledge from that fruit. I can tell it’s good, I just hope she’s evil in the hay” is based on the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.
7. The line “she would not be allowed to leave the goats to rejoin the sheep” is a reference to many Biblical passages about separating the goats from the sheep.
8. The lines that begin with “When [God] saw how men saw women, he realized his spirit would not remain in men forever” are based on Genesis 6:3.

9. The line “[God’s] heart was heavy” is based on Genesis 6:6.
10. The line “I could flood the earth...” is based on Genesis 6:7.
11. The part about Noah is based on Genesis 6:8-22.
12. Part 2, “After God’s Heart,” is based on 2 Samuel 11. I take a lot of liberties with it.
13. The line “David was a man after God’s own heart” is based on 1 Samuel 13:14 and Acts 13:22.
14. The line “He was chosen to rule over Israel despite the fact that he resembled a string-bean” is based on 1 Samuel 16.
15. David was 30 when he became king (2 Samuel 5:4).
16. The lines about David tending sheep are based on 1 Samuel 17.
17. Bathsheba’s age is not given, so I made her 15.
18. The part about Nathan confronting David is based on 2 Samuel 12.
19. The line “messes men made” is a reference to the mewithoutYou song “Messes of Men” from their 2006 album *Brother, Sister*.
20. The subheading “Father’s Work” is based on the Brand New song “Millstone,” which says, “I was about my father’s work.” It is from their 2006 album *The Devil and God are Raging Inside Me*.
21. Part 3, “Father’s Work,” is based on Matthew 5:27-30 and John 8:1-11. I take a lot of liberties with the two narratives.
22. The line “Jesus knew that to do his father’s work, he was going to have to endure more pain than he could ever bear” is based on Jesus dying on the cross. The lines following are a reference to grace covering sin.

23. The line from God, “It’s all I have left to offer,” is a reference to God sending Jesus as a sacrifice.

The Jules Renard line before “death, explain yourself: part II” is from *The Journal of Jules Renard*.

“death, explain yourself: part II”

1. This piece is for the Lewellyn family. Thank you for letting me into your lives.  
“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” Matthew 5:4
2. This piece was used with the permission of the Lewellyn family.
3. This piece is also for the people who helped me through this time in my life. Words could never express my gratitude, but they are all I know to give.
4. In section 10, I refer to Paul being at peace with his suffering, promising that death would be better. This is a reference to Philippians 1:21-23.
5. The line “do you expect us to trust someone who says they will give when they take and take and take?” is a reference to the Sufjan Stevens song “Casimir Pulaski Day,” where he says, “All the glory when he took our place/but he took my shoulders and he shook my face/and he takes and he takes and he takes.” It is from his 2005 album *Illinoise* [sic].
6. The line “O death, where is your sting?” comes from 1 Corinthians 15:55.
7. The line “I’ll take a sting over this weight that is crushing me” is a reference to the Brand New song “Limousine,” which says, “Can I get myself out from underneath this guilt that will crush me?”
8. The story of Jacob wrestling God is found in Genesis 32.

9. The line “If none of us know what we need, how do we ask?” is a slight reference to Romans 8, where Paul talks about the Spirit interceding for us when we do not know what to ask for in our prayers.
10. The story of the Good Samaritan is found in Luke 10:25-37.
11. The portions about Emilyann are used with her permission.
12. Jess Sr., Meggie’s grandfather, passed away three months after I wrote this piece. I added portions of that story to this piece, but later realized they felt out of place in a piece capturing the immediate emotions of grief following a death.
13. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” comes from Matthew 5:4. The Manchester Orchestra line before “For Heaven’s Sake” is from the song “Simple Math” on their 2011 album *Simple Math*.

#### “For Heaven’s Sake”

1. “For Heaven’s sake” is a common phrase.
2. The line “Store up for yourself treasures in Heaven” comes from Matthew 6:20.
3. The line “you can drive your Ferrari all the way to the Pearly Gates” is a spin on the Rick Ross song “911,” where he raps: “If I die today/on the highway to Heaven/Can I let my top down in my 911?” It is from his 2012 album *God Forgives, I Don’t*.
4. The line “God may be in the details” is based on the common idiom.
5. The line “Our Heaven is a rap song that forgot the meaning behinds the possessions we brag about owning” is based on theories that rap music is liberation music, expressing a race’s liberation from repression. Many times, the possessions rappers talk about are more significant than the items themselves, serving only as

indications of their freedom from white repression, but often the message can get lost.

6. The line “How could cars, clothes, and money free us...” is a reference to the Kanye West song “New God Flow,” where he raps: “Cars, money, girls, and the clothes/Aww man, you sold your soul.” It is from the 2012 G.O.O.D. Music compilation *Cruel Summer*.
7. The part about Paul believing that Heaven was coming soon, along with a direct quote from his letter, comes from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:3.
8. The story of Jacob’s dream of the ladder descending from Heaven is from Genesis 28:10-19.
9. Jesus’ parable about the treasure hidden in the field is found in Matthew 13:44-46.
10. The story of Jesus telling the Pharisees that the kingdom of God was within them is found in Luke 17:20-37.
11. The line “Let’s build our own arks, flee our Sodom, free ourselves from Egypt, leave our lion’s den, exit the belly of the fish, rise from our graves” is an allusion to the stories of Lot, Moses, Daniel, Jonah, and Jesus.
12. The paragraph that starts “Like Jacob, I have dreamt a union between Heaven and Earth” contains portions of a spoken word poem I wrote entitled “The Union.”
13. “The Old Rugged Cross” was written by George Bennard in 1912.

## ABSTRACT

A collection of essays about faith and doubt, blurring the line between fiction and nonfiction, the Biblical world and the present world, the questions we ask and the answers we give ourselves, and the black and white areas of God that fade into gray.