

Born Again

I don't know where God is specifically, but I'm positive that I left Him in Ronkonkoma, the place of my youth, a mid-sized town of middle-class Catholics, planted in the very center of Long Island, where strips of shopping centers stretched every other mile, each boasting a barber shop, kosher deli, Italian butcher, stationery store; where kids on skates outnumbered the cars on the streets during summer afternoons, all in search of a challenge from one of the hundred patchwork hockey teams; where boredom meant an innocent rock fight, aiming bottle rockets at the neighbor's house in the bright of the day, and seeing how many different things we could put on the rails of the train tracks before the 4:06 from the City derailed tragically and burst into flames right before our eyes.

God was most definitely in Ronkonkoma, on the bike rides to the ball field that seemed to take forever, the desperate hope that Steven Sileo's team didn't beat us down to the good field with the high fence in left, so we didn't have to play on the shitty field with all the crabgrass and no fence, where home runs rolled instead of soared.

God roamed the outfield with me, made me feel like Holden Caulfield's brother, Allie, seeing pictures in the clouds, composing ridiculous poems for girls I knew I never could get, then hearing the crack of the bat, because even at fourteen aluminum was a sin, the *crack* of the bat, leaving the clouds and the poetry and my loves behind to chase down a fraying white ball.

None of this holy reminiscing means a thing to my father today.

"You need God in your life," he says.

"*Dad—*"

"Don't Dad me, goddamn it, my grandson needs to go to church. Needs to know about having faith. Christ, I wouldn't even

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care if he started going to that Episcopational church you got married in.”

If he said that to me fifteen years ago, I would’ve called my dad a retard.

Jen and I married in a Congregational church on a dirt road in Vermont. During the wedding rehearsal my father spent the first half hour in the vestibule, reading all the pamphlets he could on this alien religion before he could step foot inside.

“Dad, c’mon, Rona’s waiting.”

“Who the hell is Rona?”

“She’s our minister, Dad. Would you cut it out.”

“A woman? Jesus Christ, is that right?” Saying it not as if he were passing judgment, but honestly asking: *Is it legal to be married by a woman?*

I’m telling you. Look at our wedding pictures today—every single one in that album that my father’s in. He’s wearing that classic puss of his—the goddamn baby.

Somewhere between my late teens and now, over the years of living what I recognize as a basically uneventful life, I lost God. I must have buried him away somewhere in my parents’ basement behind the boxes of baseball cards and old soccer trophies, maybe flattened him between the pages of an old photo album, like people do with flowers that once meant something.

When Billy and I were young, when hitting a Wiffle ball out of the backyard meant we possessed threatening power, when it wasn’t unimaginable, as it is today, to roller skate freely in my parents’ basement without fear of smacking a skull on the ceiling joists, our father erected an elaborate playroom there, in the basement, complete with an intricate fort. He built secure compartments and shadowy corners, created darkness so thick that I had to knock to make sure Billy wasn’t in there before I crawled inside for a session of solitude.

My father loved it dark and private, where a man could take long and deep breaths alone with only his conscience to worry

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about, away from everyone. “It’s going to be a pisser,” he told us, wringing his hands. If he could’ve squeezed himself into there, a Pall Mall dangling from his tight lips, his right eye squinting slightly, he would have. God might lurk somewhere in there for all I know, but today I can’t fit in that fort.

When he was around, though, the days I could squeeze my skinny body into those precious morsels of privacy, God appeared in the form of my father standing over Billy and me on Sunday mornings before church, burning holes through us with his eyes while we desperately tried to swallow down these giant pills he identified as vitamins. Billy and I hated church, couldn’t even stand the hollow sound of the kneelers clonking against the pews in front of us, but we despised gagging down those vitamins more.

“You two are *not* getting up from those chairs until those goddamn things are gone.” The reasonable part of him allowed Billy and me to swallow the gigantic pills in thirteen jagged pieces.

“Hurry up,” he’d pressure us. “I don’t want to be late for eight o’clock mass.” Our fingers and tongues glowed white from the vitamins melting onto us, already beginning to disintegrate before we could swallow them.

“If we have to go to 9:30 and I have to sing, I swear...,” he’d say.

Today I can swallow ten, fifteen pills at a time if I want to. I can throw down a multi-vitamin, some anxiety medication, a magnesium pill, ginkgo, gelcaps, super calcium, horse tranquilizers, anything you want and all at the same time. The problem now is that God is nowhere to be seen.

My son turned two last month on Easter Sunday, the day of Jesus Christ’s resurrection. My boy loves the Easter Bunny, relishes decorating Easter eggs, identifies the colors smeared on his fingers by name. He’s got no clue, though, who God is, what it means to kneel and be penitent.

I’m positive my father had me kneeling at my bedside at two, my hands tangled in rosary beads, my little arms reaching into the holy water at Saint Joseph’s for eight o’clock mass.

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“Get your ass off the goddamn pew and kneel the right way,” he’d say to us, maybe even at two, if we dared a hint of laziness during mass.

My son’s never seen the inside of a church, knows nothing about Jesus, the sign of the cross, Sunday school—nothing about the Bible—has no toys that could possibly resemble Noah’s Ark. The worst of it, though, is that he’s never been christened, never had the thought of God in the center of his heart; so he has never had the chance to lose him like I have.

My dad had Billy and me stumbling over pews mere moments after vitamin mornings, totally embarrassed, just to receive the host, the symbolic body of Christ, from Father Kholi instead of a goddamn Eucharistic minister. By the time I got back to our pew, I needed oxygen.

“Don’t chew the goddamn host,” he whispered hotly in my ear. “Let it dissolve in your mouth.”

“Up straight when you kneel.”

“Hide your face if the host hasn’t dissolved.”

“You’d better be praying, mister.”

I felt thrown into a game of holy Twister kneeling there next to my father, who definitely splashed too much Aramis on in the morning.

When you get older in Ronkonkoma, you fill in the space between Sundays, occupy the time between the months of waiting for your dad to drag your sinnin’ ass to confession, by upsetting the neighborhood on boring summer nights. We’d come out of our houses like vampires, shadows from a distance until we got together in tight circles, slapped high fives, and dished out headlocks. On most of the nights we carried out our destruction, you could make out the shapes, could almost see the gases swirling in and out of every star in the sky.

Boredom stunted our brain activity so completely, that we’d carry out these atrocities on the lawns or doorsteps of our closest

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neighbors: collect all the disgusting mounds of Mike and Eddie's Doberman's shit and line front porches with them. Sometimes, if we thought of it ahead of time, we'd put birthday candles in them for added effect. We approached our work in earnest, made everything symmetrical, and stole the best birthday candles from M&N's Stationery store, making sure we placed them deep into the shit and precisely in the center of the mounds.

We'd step back into the cool of the evening, and watch the tiny flames bounce off the nighttime. The farther we stepped back from it, the more beautiful the scene, and that was all the justification we needed for carrying out anything we did.

I could hurl a rock farther than anyone in our neighborhood, so when Harold Brown's grandmother called him in early every night (Haaaa-wuuuld, gurgled through the brown phlegm in her throat), I retreated to my backyard to try and hit him with rocks while he ran to his house, about 400 feet away.

I specialized in throwing rocks, and there was something vital and thrilling about having the ability to hurl a rock unimaginably far, so far that I never had to run and hide. There was so much power in knowing how far I threw it; in the long seconds I waited for it to make contact with something; the exhilaration in hearing the crash it made, the lives it disturbed.

"HEY," I'd hear someone yell, and become completely filled with joy. If someone would have ever yelled, "Jesus Christ what the hell was that?" well, I'd have probably wet myself.

Out of the corners of our minds, no matter what we did or how alone we thought we were, Billy and I always sensed our father, could practically will him to the front door, work his arms like a puppet so he'd stand just so, with his arm all brown and dusty from twelve-hour work days, leaning against the top of the door. Even when we knew he was thirty-five miles away in Greenpoint, his gold Monte Carlo rumbled in our ears, had us jerking our heads down Johnson Avenue every ten minutes.

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“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It’s been six weeks and three days since my last confession.” I always thought precision was the key to redemption. Counting it down to the minutes would betray my insincerity, but measuring your last confession to the day could be the difference between absolute forgiveness and a suspended sentence for your soul.

“I know I shouldn’t have done this, Father,” I blubbered. “But I used curse words (Jesus Christ, this wooden box is fucking scary, I thought) and I have been fighting with brothers, instead of being the good example I should have been.”

“Anything else, my son?”

Then I knelt in the pew, away from the row of sinners looking like beggars on a soup line. Father Kholi assigned five Hail Marys and a few Our Fathers, but instead of reciting these prayers I thought useless, the ones I heard chanted by a bunch of zombies every Sunday, I spoke directly to God:

God, please forgive me for what I didn’t tell Father Kholi. I swore, I fought, yes, but I also stole, and I swear to you, I will pay him back in some way, but you know, God, he is a mean old man who kicks us out when we look around his store too much and he’s asked to see our money before, made us carry out in the broad daylight or else we couldn’t stay there. But God, before I forget, please forgive me, and I love you, God. I’m sorry for forgetting that part. I do love you, and I am sorry I am not reciting my Hail Marys and Our Fathers, but I thought you would appreciate this more—

“C’mon, Dad’s waiting outside,” my brother would whisper to the back of my head.

We’ll talk later, God. I promise. I genuflected to the tabernacle, took the church steps down three at a time, and followed the smell of exhaust fumes to my father’s beat-up Monte Carlo.

The older we became and the more Ronkonkoma looked the same drab place to us, the more daring and ridiculous our antics needed to be. What began as simple knock-and-run maneuvers turned into rewiring of doorbells to make them ring incessantly.

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Instead of papering a car with toilet tissue, we'd slap paint-peeling bumper stickers on the hoods. The worst thing we ever did—the prank that ended it all for me—we did to Old Man Baum.

My God, in October the leaves are so cool, even through the thick sweater I wore most of those nights while I lay on my stomach waiting for the signal. The gold chain and cross my parents got me the Christmas before dangled into the moist earth, brushing the leaves whenever I turned my head to catch reaction from my brother.

Dad lounged on the recliner, maybe asleep, but most likely catching the globs of mayonnaise falling off the sides of his liverwurst sandwich—a dog curled in a tight ball on the floor beneath him—*Playboy* all scrambled on the television.

The signal usually featured a ring, a crash, a pop—something loud and identifiable. This one hissed quietly.

Old Man Baum drove a delivery truck, left most mornings before the dew glistened black on the streets, before the first joggers. We, probably four of us, pushed ourselves flat into the cold earth near the sump. Our Plan B was solid and went as far as the railroad tracks from Ronkonkoma to the City. I would have run all the way to Queens if I had to. We waited for the identifiable signal, and there is no greater excitement for a boy than to hear loud sounds, to run terrified down the train tracks with that sweet stinging feeling in your chest with every lungful of air.

Harold Brown delivered that night with his pocketknife, the slow, methodic claps of his sneakers on Calvert Avenue, and his detailed knowledge of automobiles. My cheeks rose, eyes tightened, and I ducked down as if waiting for the impact. I thought I would hear the leak, the rushing hiss, but Harold fixed it so the air crawled out as if it escaped from a beach ball. We heard nothing destructive until:

Bursts of Harold's breathing came at us louder, "Run, goddamn it," Harold's Pumas were slapping Calvert Avenue harder and faster, and we ran—through sticker bushes and laughter and holy shits—we

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fucking ran, the scenes of the night hurtling past our periphery in a gorgeous blur.

But Old Man Baum fell about a minute into the pursuit, took a tumble and splayed out all over the sharp blue stone scattered in and around the train tracks. A distinct crash came at me from behind, and Baum grunted. Harold, insanely:

“Yeah you old motherfucker, YEAH.” And endless cackling that I still cannot shake from my mind. The chase, and our exhilaration, ended.

Down the tracks about a mile, even past the burned-out car down the sandy hill in back of Kenny Miller’s house, my brother had Harold on the ground, his hands around his miserable throat.

“He was not supposed to get hurt, you fucking douchebag,” Billy forced through his teeth, shaking Harold harder with each syllable.

I bent over in exhaustion and from the dissipation of adrenaline, had my hands on my knees. “He’s not getting to work tomorrow, between his truck and his injuries,” I told them. “We are going to pay for this.”

“Dude, I ain’t got no fucking money,” Michael said.

“No, jerkoff,” I said back to him between breaths.

Everyone, even Harold, probably while he was rubbing Billy’s handprints from his neck, understood that we all had gone too far this time, that Old Man Baum, who indeed lived after that, despite the tragic conclusions that raced though my mind nightly for the next month, might as well have been one of our own fathers: deep red tans on the back of their necks, perfect curves of dirt under the fingernails, and that beautiful don’t-fucking-mess-with-me-tonight attitude that made us hug them harder, made us press our lips deep into their cheeks—no matter how much the beard stubble hurt us—before we pulled the blankets to our chins at night.

We needed our fathers to be indestructible. One of the worst moments of my life came tumbling at me during a bit of alone time in the fort of solitude downstairs. My thoughts about nothing in particular leaped away from me when a sustained cacophonous

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racket came barreling down the staircase and bounced off the walls of the fort. I crawled outside on my hands and knees in terror of what I might find. It sounded like someone rolled a car up to the edge of the staircase and let it plummet to the basement. What I found was my father on his back at the foot of the stairs, his trademark 50s Brooklyn-boy squib of hair standing up straight.

“Son of a bitch,” he said in a voice I hadn’t heard before.

He pulled himself up and was fine after a few minutes. I think he was jabbing a hoe into his tomato garden later that same day. That’s not the point, though. I didn’t want even that short moment of his vulnerability. It didn’t matter that he’d yell later, bark instructions at us like a deranged drill sergeant. He had fallen, and that was something not easy to deal with. How many moments in a lifetime does a man have to stand over the injured or dying body of his father?

The night Old Man Baum took his mighty fall, so complete that we found what had to be one of his slippers the next day, brought me back to my father’s monumental descent. Baum had a nine-to-five (Fuck nine-to-five. Who had a nine-to-five anyway? It was more like a six-to-six in Ronkonkoma.), had sons, and a responsibility to them. I never knew for sure the extent of his injuries, if he even had any (There was no sign of fresh blood at the scene of his fall.), but just to imagine the humiliation his sons must have felt to see their father—hair tousled, completely out of breath, and entering his castle with one slipper—turned my stomach in shame.

Yes, I know: I was the one who hit rocks the size of golf balls clear through the Pepeys’ shed with a fungo bat. I took thrills in smashing innocent jack-o-lanterns, obvious family projects, all over the front steps of strangers, so they’d have to walk over the kill in the morning. And I was the one who stole every single phone book from every single house on Juniper Drive.

Old Man Baum, though, transformed me for good.

My bicycle roamed the streets alone that night, my pedaling slow and constant. When I arrived at the church, most of Ronkonkoma

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had turned their lights out. I forced myself to find my way through the eerie back roads that separated me from Saint Joseph's Church.

Every move I made inside was magnified with echoes—like there were microphones everywhere I stepped, every word I uttered. The sorrow that consumed me and the penance I desperately needed to endure pounded on my mind inside Saint Joseph's that night. I knelt at a pew farthest away from the tabernacle, where the body of Christ resided, and felt compelled to speak my words to God aloud. *I'm sorry, God, Lord, Father.* Consumed by my awkwardness, even in the sole presence of God in his great big empty house, I reached for my gold chain and cross, desperate to clutch something. It was gone.

All right, all right: I won't try to glean anything from that. You are spared. I lost the chain and cross, though, and my father spent a lot of money on it—way more money than we could afford. Walking around Ronkonkoma without that cross lying on my sternum was like not having a comb sticking out of my back pocket, or like being naked.

Married couples oftentimes ride in the car for hours to scope out new homes. Others park the vehicles outside the chained driveways of car dealerships after hours to dream about the next car they might park in the garage. Jen and I? We're in the market for a good church.

"What about that one?" I ask my wife. "That one looks nice enough."

"It's Catholic," she says, and I'm used to the conversation ending right there these days.

"If your son isn't christened," a drunk aunt barked at me during a graduation party for one of my meathead cousins last month, "won't he go to Hell when he dies?"

Yeah, she's a fucking idiot, but ridiculously, it's something that tortures me all the time.

Jack will meet God eventually. I rest easier, let up on the my-son-burning-in-hellfire bit, when I learn that many children aren't

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baptized until their teens, some well into adulthood. I have a feeling, though, that when the time comes for my son, I'll feel obligated to get in the tub with him.

Jack can hear me in the morning when I awaken. I have taken to calling him Jack more often now in my writing, instead of "my son," or "the boy," because he is so alive now, knows me so well already. I wake up with the dawn on most mornings before work, right when the sun starts to peek into his bedroom window. I go into the bathroom and run cold water over my hands and arms, press the water to my face. I get the shower started, then use the toilet; otherwise it takes too goddamn long for the water to heat up.

I have gotten into the habit of showering quickly ever since Jack became interesting. While I'm performing my morning rituals, he's on the other side of the wall in his bedroom, watching the sun creep through his blinds and hearing the clank of the pipes, the flow of water through the wall, and I've heard these sounds before when my wife finally rolls out of bed to start her day, and by the time Jen bends naked beside the tub to test the water with her gorgeous hands, the ones, unfortunately, my son has not inherited, I'm kneeling beside Jack, dripping wet, a towel around my waist, looking fresh from the womb, all new, asking my son about his dreams the night before. I want every morning for him like this, where the sun comes in, the pipes roar, and I come to life for him, much like a god. I want him in his bed, eyes open and thinking, saying "Hi, Daddy," with a tone of complete confidence, like he's been expecting me, like he's going to expect me the rest of his life.