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### **Author's Note**

I never liked jazz music because jazz music doesn't resolve. But I was outside the Baghdad Theatre one night when I saw a man playing the saxophone. I stood there for fifteen minutes and he never opened his eyes.

After that I liked jazz music.

Sometimes you have to watch somebody love something before you can love it yourself. It is as if they are showing you the way.

I used to not like God because God didn't resolve. But that was before any of this happened.

## **1**

### **Beginnings**

#### **God on a Dirt Road Walking Toward Me**

I once listened to an Indian on television say that God was in the wind and the water, and I wondered at how beautiful that was because it meant you could swim in Him or have Him brush your face in a breeze. I am early in my story, but I believe I will stretch out into eternity, and in heaven I will reflect upon these early days, these days when it seemed God was down a dirt road, walking toward me. Years ago He was a

swinging speck in the distance; now He is close enough I can hear His singing. Soon I will see the lines on His face.

My father left my home when I was young, so when I was introduced to the concept of God as Father I imagined Him as a stiff, oily man who wanted to move into our house and share a bed with my mother. I can only remember this as a frightful and threatening idea. We were a poor family who attended a wealthy church, so I imagined God as a man who had a lot of money and drove a big car. At church they told us we were children of God, but I knew God's family was better than mine, that He had a daughter who was a cheerleader and a son who played football. I was born with a small bladder so I wet the bed till I was ten and later developed a crush on the homecoming queen who was kind to me in a political sort of way, which is something she probably learned from her father, who was the president of a bank. And so from the beginning, the chasm that separated me from God was as deep as wealth and as wide as fashion.

In Houston, where I grew up, the only change in the weather came in late October when cold is sent down from Canada. Weathermen in Dallas would call weathermen in Houston so people knew to bring their plants in and watch after their dogs. The cold came down the interstate, tall and blue, and made reflections in the mirrored windows of large buildings, moving over the Gulf of Mexico as if to prove that sky holds magnitude over water. In Houston, in October, everybody walks around with a certain energy as if they are going to be elected president the next day, as if they are going to get married.

In the winter it was easier for me to believe in God, and I suppose it had to do with new weather, with the color of leaves clinging to trees, with the smoke in the fireplaces of big houses in opulent neighborhoods where I would ride my bike. I half

believed that if God lived in one of those neighborhoods, He would invite me in, make me a hot chocolate and talk to me while His kids played Nintendo and stabbed dirty looks over their shoulders. I would ride around those neighborhoods until my nose froze, then back home where I closed myself off in my room, put on an Al Green record and threw open the windows to feel the cold. I would stretch across my bed for hours and imagine life in a big house, visited by important friends who rode new bikes, whose fathers had expensive haircuts and were interviewed on the news.

I have been with my own father only three times, each visit happening in my childhood, each visit happening in cold weather. He was a basketball coach, and I do not know why he left my mother. I only know he was tall and handsome and smelled like beer; his collar smelled like beer, his hands like beer, and his coarse, unshaven face smelled like beer. I do not drink much beer myself, but the depth of the scent has never left me. My friend Tony the Beat Poet will be drinking a beer at Horse Brass Pub and the smell will send me to a pleasant place that exists only in recollections of childhood.

My father was a big man, I think, bigger than most, stinky and strong like a river at flood. On my second visit to my father I saw him throw a football across a gym, drilling the spiral into the opposite hoop where it shook the backboard. There was no action my father committed that I did not study as a work of wonder. I watched as he shaved and brushed his teeth and put on his socks and shoes in motions that were more muscle than grace, and I would stand at his bedroom door hoping he wouldn't notice my awkward stare. I looked purposely as he opened a beer, the tiny can hiding itself in his big hand, the foam of it spilling over the can, his red lips slurping the excess, his tongue taking the taste from his mustache. He was a brilliant machine of a thing.

When my sister and I visited my father we would eat from the grill every night, which is something we never did with my mother. My father would crumble Ritz crackers into the meat and add salt and sauces, and I thought, perhaps, he was some sort of chef, some sort of person who ought to write books about cooking meat. Later he would take my sister and me to the grocery store and buy us a toy, any toy we wanted. We'd pace the long aisle of shiny prizes, the trucks and Barbies and pistols and games. In the checkout line I'd cling to the shiny, slick box in stillness and silence. On the drive home we'd take turns sitting on his lap so we could drive, and whoever wasn't steering would work the shifter, and whoever worked the steering wheel could drink from my father's can of beer.

It is not possible to admire a person more than I admired that man. I know, from the three visits I made to him, the blended composite of love and fear that exists only in a boy's notion of his father.

There were years between his calls. My mother would answer the phone, and I knew by the way she stood silently in the kitchen that it was him. A few days later he would come for a visit, always changed in the showing of his age, the new wrinkles, the grayed hair and thick skin around his eyes, and within days we would go to his apartment for the weekend. About the time I entered middle school, he disappeared completely.

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[Book & Graphic Design—what ever you do, don't use any musical symbols for hiatus dingbats. Pick something cool that looks good with the text and/or cover. Thanks.]

Today I wonder why it is God refers to Himself as “Father” at all. This, to me, in light of the earthly representation of the role, seems a marketing mistake. Why would God want to call Himself Father when so many fathers abandon their children?

As a child, the title Father God offered an ambiguous haze with which to interact. I understood what a father did as well as I understood the task of a shepherd. All the vocabulary about God seemed to come from an ancient history, before video games, Palm Pilots, and the Internet.

If you would have asked me, I suppose I would have told you there was a God, but I could not have formulated a specific definition based on my personal experience. Perhaps it was because my Sunday school classes did much to help us memorize commandments and little to teach us who God was and how to relate to Him, or perhaps it was because they did and I wasn't listening. Nevertheless, my impersonal God served me fine as I had no need of the real thing. I needed no deity to reach out of heaven and wipe my nose, so none of it actually mattered. If God was on a dirt road walking toward me, He was on the other side of a hill, and I hadn't begun to look for Him anyway.

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About the time I turned ten was when I started to sin. I believe it was ten, although it could have been earlier, but ten is about the age a boy starts to sin, so I am sure it was in there somewhere. Girls begin to sin when they are twenty-three or something, but they do life much softer by their very nature and so need less of a run at things.

I sinned only in bits at first, small lies, little inconsistencies to teachers about homework and that sort of thing. I learned the craft well, never looking my teacher in the eye, always speaking quickly, from the diaphragm, never feeble about the business of deception.

“Where is your homework?” My teacher would ask.

“I lost it.”

“You lost it yesterday. You lost it last week.”

“I am terrible about losing things. I need to learn.” (Always be self-deprecating.)

“What am I going to do with you, Donald?”

“I am grateful for your patience.” (Always be grateful.)

“I should call your mother.”

“She’s deaf. Boating accident. Piranha.” (Always be dramatic. Use hand gestures.)

I also used a great deal of cusswords. Not those churchly cusswords, dang and darnit, dagnabit and frickin’, but big, robust cusswords like the ones they use in PG movies, the ones the guys would say only to each other. Cusswords are pure ecstasy when you are twelve, buzzing in the mouth like a battery on the tongue. My best friend at the time, Roy, and I would walk home from school, stopping at the playground by the Methodist church to cuss out Travis Massie and his big sister Patty. Travis always made fun of Roy because his last name was Niswanger. It took me two years to understand why the name Niswanger was so funny.

Words turned to fists by the end of the year, and I was thirteen when I took my first punch. Square in the face. It was Tim Mitchell, the little blond kid who went to my

church, and the whole time we were circling each other he was saying he was going to give me a fat lip, and I was shouting cusswords in incomplete sentences; scary cusswords. He hit me in the face and I went down beneath a sky as bright and blue as jazz music, and there were children laughing, and Patty Massie was pointing her finger and Roy was embarrassed. There was a lot of yelling after that, and Tim backed down when Roy said he was going to give Tim a fat lip, and Travis was singing the whole time: nice-wanger, nice-wanger, nice-wanger.

Before any of this happened, though, when I was in kindergarten, I got sent to the principal's office for looking up a girl's dress during nap time, which is something that I probably did, but not for the immediately considered motive, more likely that her open skirt was in the way of something I really wanted to look at, because I remember the age quite well and had no interest whatsoever in what might be up a girl's dress. I received a huge lecture on the importance of being a gentlemen from Mr. Golden who stood just taller than his desk and had a finger that wagged like the tail of a dog and a tie with a knot as big as a tumor and he might as well have been talking to me about physics or politics or something because I wasn't interested in whatever it was that I wasn't supposed to be interested in. But everything changed in the summer of my twelfth year.

Across the street from Roy's house was a large, empty field divided by railroad tracks, and it was there that I first identified with the Adam spoken of at the beginning of the Bible because it was there that I saw my first naked woman. We were playing with our bikes when Roy stumbled across a magazine whose pages were gaudily dressed in colorful type and the stuff of bad advertising. Roy approached the magazine with a stick, and I stood behind him as he flipped the pages from the distance of a twig. We had found

a portal, it seemed, into a world of magic and wonder, where creatures exist in the purest form of beauty. I say we found a portal, but it was something more than that; it was as if we were being led *through* a portal, because I sensed in my chest, in the pace of my heart, that I was having an adventure. I felt the way a robber might feel when he draws a gun inside a bank.

At last Roy confronted the magazine by hand, slowly devouring its pages, handing it to me after diving deeper into the woods, off the trail common to us and our bikes. We were not speaking, only turning the pages, addressing the miraculous forms, the beauty that has not been matched in all mountains and rivers. I felt that I was being shown a secret, a secret that everybody in the world had always known and had kept from me. We were there for hours until the sun set, at which time we hid our treasure beneath logs and branches, each swearing to the other that we would tell nobody of our find.

That night in bed, my mind played the images over as a movie, and I felt the nervous energy of a river furling through my lower intestines, ebbing in tides against the gray matter of my mind, delivering me into a sort of ecstasy from which I felt I would never return. This new information seemed to give grass its green and sky its blue and now, before I had requested a reason to live, one had been delivered: Naked Women.

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All this gave way to my first encounter with guilt, which is still something entirely inscrutable to me, as if aliens were sending transmissions from another planet, telling me there is a right and wrong in the universe. And it wasn't only sexual sin that

brought about feelings of guilt, it was lies and mean thoughts and throwing rocks at cars with Roy. My life had become something to hide; there were secrets in it. My thoughts were private thoughts, my lies were barriers that protected my thoughts, my sharp tongue a weapon to protect the ugly me. I would lock myself in my room, isolating myself from my sister and my mother, not often to do any sort of sinning, but simply because I had become a creature of odd secrecy. This is where my early ideas about religion came into play.

The ideas I learned in Sunday school, the ideas about sin and how we shouldn't sin, kept bugging me. I felt as though I needed to redeem myself, the way a kid feels when he finally decides to clean his room. My carnal thinking had made a mess of my head, and I felt as though I were standing in the doorway of my mind, wondering where to begin, how to organize my thoughts so they weren't so out of control.

That's when I realized that religion might be able to hose things down, get me back to normal so I could have fun without feeling guilty or something. I just didn't want to have to think about this guilt crap anymore.

For me, however, there was a mental wall between religion and God. I could walk around inside religion and never, on any sort of emotional level, understand that God was a person, an actual Being with thoughts and feelings and that sort of thing. To me, God was more of an idea. It was something like a slot machine, a set of spinning images that dolled out rewards based on behavior and, perhaps, chance.

The slot-machine God provided a relief for the pinging guilt, and a sense of hope that my life would get organized toward a purpose. I was too dumb to test the merit of the slot machine idea. I simply began to pray for forgiveness, thinking the cherries might line up and the light atop the machine would flash, spilling shiny tokens of good fate. What I was doing was more in line with superstition than spirituality. But it worked. If something nice happened to me, I thought it was God, and if something nice didn't, I went back to the slot machine, knelt down in prayer, and pulled the lever a few more times. I liked this God very much because you hardly had to talk to it and it never talked back. But the fun never lasts.

My slot-machine God disintegrated on Christmas Eve when I was thirteen. I still think of that night as "the lifting of the haze," and it remains one of the few times I can categorically claim an interaction with God. Though I am half certain these interactions are routine, they simply don't feel as metaphysical as the happenings of that night. It was very simple, but it was one of those profound revelations that only God can induce. What happened was that I realized I was not alone in my own surroundings. I'm not talking about ghosts or angels or anything; I'm talking about other people. As silly as it sounds, I realized, late that night, that other people had feelings and fears, and that my interactions with them actually meant something, that I could make them happy or sad in the way that I associated with them. Not only could I make them happy or sad, but I was responsible for the way I interacted with them. I suddenly felt responsible. I was supposed to make them happy. I was not supposed to make them sad. Like I said, it sounds simple, but when you really get it for the first time, it hits hard.

I was shell shocked.

This is how the bomb fell: For my mother that year I had purchased a shabby Christmas gift: a book, the contents of which she would never be interested in. I had had a sum of money with which to buy presents, and the majority of it I used to buy fishing equipment, as Roy and I had started fishing in the creek behind Wal Mart.

My extended family opens gifts on Christmas Eve, leaving the immediate family to open gifts the next morning, and so in my room that night were wonderful presents, toys, and games and candy and clothes, and as I lay in bed I counted and categorized them in the moonlight, the battery-operated toys of greatest importance, the underwear of no consequence at all.

So in the moonlight I drifted in and out of anxious sleep, and this is when it occurred to me that the gift I had purchased for my mother was bought with the petty change left after I had pleased myself. I realized I had set the happiness of my mother beyond my own material desires.

This was a different sort of guilt from anything I had previously experienced. It was a heavy guilt, not the sort of guilt that I could do anything about. It was a haunting feeling, the sort of sensation you get when you wonder whether you are two people, the other of which does things you can't explain, bad and terrible things.

The guilt was so heavy that I fell out of bed onto my knees and begged, not a slot-machine God, but a living, feeling God, to stop the pain. I crawled out of my room and into the hallway by my mother's door and lay on my elbows and face for an hour or so, going sometimes into sleep, before finally the burden lifted and I was able to return to my room.

We opened the rest of our gifts the next morning and I was pleased to receive what I did, but when my mother opened her silly book, I asked her forgiveness, saying how much I wished I had done more. She, of course, pretended to enjoy the gift, saying how she wanted to know about the subject.

I was still feeling terrible that evening when the family gathered for dinner around a table so full of food a kingdom could feast. I sat low in my chair, eye-level with the bowls of potatoes and corn, having my hair straightened by ten talking women, all happy the holiday had come to a close.

And while they ate and talked and chatted away another Christmas, I felt ashamed and wondered silently whether they knew they were eating with Hitler.

**NOTE:**

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