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Oh God

And the Roman people didn't believe in Jesus. They nailed him to the cross and put a crown of thorns on his head. The camp counselor says to us elementary kids as they pass around a plastic crown of thorns while we hold our paper bags filled with air in our hands. *Finally, the last nail was hammered in by JUDAS.* POP-POP-POP; all the bags are struck by these little kids in the dark, candle lit classroom. Giggles erupt from the kids excited to strike their paper bags and get the loudest POP. From that day I decided that Christianity was just stories with spooky twists. None of it was real, or that's what I told myself.

"How was bible camp?" mum asked.

"Please never take me there again," I cried into my mum's chest.

I had nightmares of that day for months. A bunch of sociopathic children giggling at such a terrible story. My little brother was one of them. He didn't understand the gravity of Jesus dying for our sins. He didn't believe in God at all, he was just excited for the jello representing flames that the rich man who wronged Lazarus floated over.

Religion has always been a funny thing in the Fontaine household. Grandma is Christian, mom is Christian, brother is atheist and grandpa has sworn off the whole religion thing. Except

for on holidays. That's the best time to talk religion and politics, on the holiest of days with the drinks flowing.

"We should have a shot before mama and papa come up," I tell mum before Christmas dinner.

"Cheers," she says, handing me a shot of rum to go with my beer.

Speaking of the devil, they show up with homemade buns and baklava less than a minute after the burning sensation of rum is down my throat. I'm not sure this is how Jesus intends us to celebrate Christmas but when living with two generations of family in the same house, how else would one celebrate?

"How's college going?" grandma asks, hoping to hear about a new boy toy or articles I'm stirring up.

"It's good. The classics class I'm in is more of a religious 101 course so that's a bit fun I guess," I reply. The course was supposed to be on the classics of Greek and Romans from the description, meaning there was no way to escape talking about religion. At this point I'm confused, there might be a God but we don't find out until we die. So, what's the point in living like a Saint for nothing in the end?

My papa and I exchange a slumped eye roll across the dinner table. I've told him my frustrations with that course. About how most of the students already knew the bible and would scoff when I'd question the validity or contradictions of passages. How any commentary I had

from a sociological perspective on *The Aeneid* was discredited as *not reading religious texts the way it was intended*.

After exchanging some pleasantries on the story of Job and Saint Augustine's *Confessions* with my grandma, I retreated downstairs to my grandpa's smoke spot. I definitely struck a nerve with him.

"If God loves all he wouldn't have made me experience this or that," he says as I sit next to him and his couple of beer cans. I've always gotten along with my grandpa, we often question why the world is the way it is or talk about different perspectives together while he has his little handrolled cigarettes.

"There shouldn't be a wrong opinion when the text is made by man," I say irritated at the course. The text I did best on was *Plato's Republic*. Socrates was a witty character who questioned everything and made me question everything. There was no right, no wrong and that's how I read religion. It's not wrong to believe, it's not wrong not to believe and it should be okay to not know who's up there.

"You have to believe in something. I believe in love," my grandpa says, stopping my train of thought with a side hug. That's the most positive bit of religious advice he's given, typically it's tipsy tagines that I listen to about how he's been wronged by God in this lifetime. We both laugh and discuss the different online articles he's been reading on different religions. Turns out that idea he got from the movie *Avatar*. I guess we learn different beliefs from different places I think, giving him a big hug and heading back upstairs to help mum clean up.

“If you hate the course, why don’t you drop it?” mum asks putting leftovers in spaghetti stained tupperware.

“Because I can be good at it, I just have to *get* this religion thing,” I reply half heartedly. I don’t have to get something I don’t believe in, but I have to learn the language to pass the course.

Truthfully, religion shouldn’t be something one *gets*, it should be researched and extensively questioned on the validity of the authors or stories in it - or at least that’s what I think should be done in a university course. That’s the sociology side of me; I want to know how, why and when things were created historically. While the Bible could be considered a historical text, there’s no clarity on it which is frustrating.

The last half of the semester I’m slumped over my laptop, writing a blog series on sex advice for a class. I wonder if whoever is up there approves of B.O.B (Battery operated boyfriends)? I have a long list of questions for them if I ever meet them.

Even if I don’t understand or believe in religion, I still appreciate the beauty that can come from it. The stories such as *The Odyssey*, the hope it can bring to people and the art. The art is my favourite, even if baby Jesus looks like a man in many paintings.

As an art history professor explained *Christianity was a religion for the poor. Mother Mary was often painted with first batch azule blue paint to show her divinity.* It was beautiful this process of painting, first batch of the expensive paint to Mary, second batch to Jesus and third batch to the disciples. As time passed, Mary became a celebrity adorned with golds and

expensive jewels. Christianity moved from something of a voice for the poor to a class system that only the rich could afford to appreciate the beauty of religious art. That's how I think of religion in college, a beautiful entity that connected people that turned political throughout history.

The final paper for that class was a presentation paper. I have to talk about God, an exhausted college kid talking about God. Who thought that was a good idea? I decided to present the story of John and all of its contradictions, but I couldn't start writing. All I could focus on was how obnoxious Jesus was to tell a man not to hit a prostitute and he's praised for that. It became too personal but so distant as I read the story of John. Then the most obvious, non-obvious revelation hit as I read line through line on the people asking for a sign.

The sign was right there but people won't accept it. It's a tragedy that believers in God wouldn't accept his presence then and probably wouldn't even today. I spent until 5am typing how tragic it was to pray for a saviour and once they arrive to reject them. The next morning there was a long table of myself, two other classmates and two professors in front of us. As I listened to other students' presentations going deep into the meaning or purpose of these stories all I could think was I shouldn't have asked so many questions throughout my paper. They weren't interrogating these verses, they were reading the stories the way they were intended. I was next to be sacrificed.

“Through reading the gospel of John a hundred times I realize the true tragedy is to believe in a higher power and deny it at the same time,” I started shaking from doubt and energy drinks.

“I am not religious, my brother is Atheist and I was born from a mother who married and had me out of her beliefs from religion. Therefore, I was never taught religion.”

It’s funny discussing your life story and beliefs to a room that really doesn’t care what you think. The two professors looked like they were thinking about what to buy for lunch right after my presentation.

“It’s tragic to believe in God and deny his presence so greatly. Something the people begged, prayed and cried for was there for them. If they weren’t believers it wouldn’t have been tragic, rather logic to deny a guy who thinks he’s “the son of God”.”

“Wouldn’t it be more fit to be called a comedy?”

As I finished my presentation one of the professors asked.

I couldn’t believe it, the one time I read the text like a religious Christian would and he called it a comedy. That was how I read it the first time and was told I was wrong, it was a *tragedy*. We exchanged devil's advocate comments on how it could arguably be a comedy or a tragedy. How I don’t fully believe it was necessarily one or the other. That professor I was talking with was

actually the head of the department, that was the realest conversation I had with anyone in that course.

Safe to say because I *couldn't read it the way it was intended* I received a C-. Very well could've been my inability to not question everything in the text, or the professor who focused more keenly on religious meanings of the stories that landed me that grade. Either way, I'm happy and I stand by my stance. Question everything as Socrates would, reality is what we make of it. That course gave me confidence and an interest in classic literature I didn't have before. Along with a new religious identity of Agnostic. I thought not believing made me an Atheist, but to not *assign* yourself to one belief is Agnostic. Perhaps someday when I'm old, about to go into whichever light is up there, I may drift to a certain religion. There is a certain peace knowing that no one has the answer on religion though, not family or unexpectedly religious classics professors.

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