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Laws of Conversion

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Laws of Conversion

The step off the back door of the church wasn't a steep one, but it was unexpected. One moment you're in the bedded warmth of God's grace, the next you are splayed out on the concrete, staring up at the steeple without feeling in your legs, blood pooling beneath your skull.

Mrs. Stein had something of a reputation in the First Presbyterian Church, one that dated further back than many of the members could remember—myself included. I knew her as the one to be avoided: the one who stood out, yet always worked in the background. Short, dyed, blood-red hair, the same white turtleneck every Sunday. Hands on hips, as if perpetually disappointed. Unlike the other “mean” churchgoers, the children of First Presbyterian knew Mrs. Stein was different. She wouldn't just speak down to you, no. Your parents, your grandparents, your visiting family, the preacher. No holds barred.

It wasn't a particularly large leap in logic for a nine-year-old like myself to see her fall off that back step as divine. It wouldn't be a stretch for anyone, no matter how religious, or what religion. In Christianity, it's Proverbs 22:8: “whoever sows injustice will reap calamity.” In Hinduism and Buddhism, it's Karma. In science, it's Newton's third law. The truth remains the same no matter what you do (or don't) believe in.

I still wonder, every time I walk over a thick sheet of ice, what Mrs. Stein called it as she laid on the frozen sidewalk, staring up at the cross perched on the steeple. She had a whole night in the frigid December weather to think before anyone found her. Did she call it divine?

In a moment of cosmic irony, H. P. Lovecraft lamented, “In theory I am an agnostic, but pending the appearance of radical evidence I must be classed, practically and provisionally, as an atheist.” Despite becoming part of the lit-

erary canon for his writing of gods and daemons, Lovecraft could never find the space within himself for faith. Since breaking off from the church and growing old enough to think for myself, I've experienced the exact opposite. Perhaps it's been drilled into my consciousness, but the more I search for a reason to not believe the faster it chases me. In theory, I am an atheist, but pending the appearance of radical evidence I must be classed, practically and provisionally, as an agnostic.

Unfortunately for Lovecraft and myself, neither of us will live to find that radical evidence, nor will we live to see even a prospect of that evidence in the future. Thus we are stuck, like many of Lovecraft's characters, stumbling around the darkness of our beliefs, unable to prove or disprove anything, a speck in the universe. Two sides of the same coin.

It's equally impossible to prove whether I wish to find that perfect piece of evidence to forever cement my place without God or faith, or whether I cling so tightly to moments that seem divine so as to allow myself the comfort that human limitations have purpose.

The first thing a child must focus on in the First Presbyterian Church is finding alliances, as silly as it may seem in a house of peace. It came quite quickly for me, fortunately enough, with a boy named Alex. We were both three, passing the time each Sunday by drawing stick figures and having them battle to the death, all under God's roof. And it was God's roof back then. No questions, no doubt—the kind of faith only a three year old could feel. A passing shun from Mrs. Stein at seeing the pool of blood noted by a thick scribble of pencil.

It may not seem like much now, but spending every Sunday as an only child with another boy your age has some significant consequences. He was, in essence, me. I was him. Not in terms of history or family or life, even, but whatever our consciousness is made of, Alex and I became the same.

It was, of course, grounded in the mutual understanding that we did not belong at church.

We wanted to be free, to be able to talk above a whisper, to be able to spread our colored pencils and crayons out over a big table rather than carefully around us on the pew. There was something of a mutual resistance—a mutual repulsion—for the ones that stopped us from doing that and for the God that they were worshipping.

That resistance only evolved in me, despite having little reason to. For Alex it was the opposite. Upon being faced with a tragedy I struggle to imagine for myself today, Alex found faith in life's grand joke.

When Mrs. Stein returned after a few Sundays, her head wrapped and her ankle casted, most would say it was like nothing had happened at all. Same stance, if a bit more tilted, same downward gaze even to those who towered over her. I think—rather, I know—that only the children could see the change. It was in her eyes, some “loss of innocence,” but that’s not the right word. Like a child who ages out of believing in Santa and the Tooth Fairy, it seemed Mrs. Stein had lost the glimmer in her eyes. She had changed, and as someone who lost that childhood wonder fairly early on in life, I looked up at her and felt pity for the first time. When she looked back at me, it seemed she sensed this.

She continued in her infamy, many questions unanswered. Who had found her? What was she getting so late at night, alone? Where were her kids? Her husband? The boy she was tasked with caring for? One question stood out over all the others: the logical next step after falling and breaking an ankle, splitting your skull, is to yell for help, even if it is late. To scream at the top of your lungs when you realize that God’s hand isn’t coming to grab yours and lift you up—or if He does, it means, certainly, that you are dying. Mrs. Stein never made a peep. Perhaps, as some whispered around the pews in the weeks after, the shock made it impossible. She’d fried some sort of nerve in her brain.

Faith in the unfathomable tells me that she thought herself better than help, or at least the help of the mortals around her. In one climatic moment that would outshine all others in her life, she chose God. Though she survived, and even returned to church eventually, she knew what God’s response was.

In theory, she was a Christian, but with the appearance of radical evidence, she must be classed, practically and provisionally, as an atheist.

I suppose philosophy is a sort of religion on its own, even if the two seem at odds. Nihilism, Existentialism, even Marxism. There’s something inherently sacrilegious in looking for answers within oneself rather than within a god. Thus, I suppose, rather in parallel, that in some way we are our own gods, or at least the closest we will ever get to one. And thus again, rather contradictorily, there can be no search for truth without sin.

Absurdism has stuck out particularly in recent years for me. There are a number of definitions, whether they be about the chaotic nature of the universe, the lack of a higher purpose or meaning, or that reason itself is a lie to begin with. The fact that one idea can mean so many different things seems to prove absurdism, in a sense, and yet our ability to choose the definition that best supports our own consciousness is an exception that proves the rule. My favorite definition calls absurdism a comedy: there is no higher purpose, there

is no universal truth, there is no key to life itself, and yet humans will always and forever search for it. It's the greatest joke of all.

It seems I had an inkling about this great joke before I had discovered absurdism. I was never meant for faith. In fact, the idea seemed to bring out the worst in me. With a family full of Christians, I became a menace. I refused to bow my head and close my eyes at the dinner table. I would pick fights, try to get them to admit they hadn't read the Bible the whole way through, try to get them to admit to breaking its rules in a world where it's impossible to follow them. They would say that it's up to interpretation, fueling the flames. I would tell them that they're fake, that their faith was fake, that their God was fake. I would tell them about the trafficking circles in the Vatican, about the historical genocides, about the lengths people went to preserve this falsehood. I tried to break them for years and, of course, I failed.

At the end of all things, I realized how pointless it all was, how heinous even. Then I understood the joke: I had found faith in destroying it in others. I had become the blind follower I had been fighting against.

We were driving back from a Christmas Eve party, my parents, my grandparents, and me. We passed Alex's house, a place we'd always taken note of, even waved to when I was younger.

We didn't wave that day. There were people outside, cars lining the yard and the road, blocking other driveways. It was the biggest event I had ever seen in my tiny town; it seemed like the whole world was there.

I don't remember if I asked what it was, or if it was one of my parents, but the answer was the same: Alex's father was dead. This wasn't a party; this was a wake. At only five, he and his sisters had lost their dad, and were orphaned.

I sit here, wanting to introduce Alex's dad earlier in the piece, to make this seem more impactful, to say that I remember his big smile and pats on the back and him laughing at our stick figures, but I can't. I don't remember.

I have a feeling that Alex doesn't either.

One sister went to one aunt, the other to the grandparents, and Alex went to a more distant relationship. He was told to call her aunt but it wasn't true. We had only known her as Mrs. Stein.

To this day I cringe at the idea of calling her by her first name; it seems almost dangerous. To imagine others calling her that is like watching them curse each other. Alex would try, he would say "Aunt Stein," but you could tell it was forced. At five years old, you may not be able to understand death, especially the death of a parent, but you can understand what having someone like Mrs. Stein as your guardian means. Something changed, inevitably. He was no longer interested in drawing stick figures. He would sit quietly and

stare off into the crowd like he was expecting his dad to be there, smiling. Was he remembering or imagining what the man looked like?

Though we remained friends, we were never as close. He found solace with the other kids who had been through something unimaginable, and that was a group I couldn't and wouldn't insert myself into. In high school, with drivers' licenses in hand, we would go out for breakfast with just the two of us and talk about what we remembered. He never talked about his dad, and I never asked.

But I would ask him about faith, about all the horrors of it. When I was still crusading against the injustice of it all, the systemic oppression brought about by believing in something that could never be proven, I would tell Alex how I confronted a family member or friend about how nonsensical it all was. I expected excited nodding, cheering confirmation, but Alex never said anything about it. He would listen and that would be it.

When there was room for hate in me, I began to see it seep out. It seeped towards Alex now and then. When he sat, almost carefree, listening to my rants against the church without adding a single word, I almost accused him of being one of them. How could a kid, with so much reason to find faith repulsive, be so nonchalant on the topic? How could he not see the injustice I see? How could he not care?

I mistook acceptance for ignorance—a mistake I won't make again. Though Alex has surely never thought about Absurdism, Nihilism, or Existentialism, he understood them then better than I ever will. He found peace in living a life free of faith and belief, either in the church or against it. Not only was he free of that repulsion that brewed and festered, making me into someone as blind as those I resented, but he was free of the pain that comes from wondering why.

When Mrs. Stein fell on that ice, she began to learn that unknowable truth. It terrified her to be told her whole life that all the good and the bad, the noble and the cowardly, the love and hate, was all leading up to a not-so-steep step. Taking it all away was a joke she didn't find funny.

But finding the humor in life starts with finding the humor in death. It is, in fact, the only thing we have radical evidence, practically and provisionally, to believe in.