

Prologue

Jack slammed his palm onto the bartop as if the action would convince everyone present that his view was the correct one. “I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again; There is *nothing* waiting for us when we die! It’s all just blackness and worms when we bite the big one, and you’ll never tell me otherwise.”

A pair of groans rose from the friends pressed belly first into the sticky wood of their local bar. They’d had this same conversation a hundred times over the years. Pius was almost to the point where he could mouth along with his friend as he ranted, if he really wanted to. Every Thursday night they dragged themselves into this moldy den, and if they weren’t screaming at each other about politics or whose wife was more of a pain, the conversation would inevitably settle on religion.

To his right, Tom motioned to the bartender with two raised fingers. When the pair of shots were delivered safely before him, he slid one over to Pius with an insistent hand on his shoulder. “Alright Pius,” he said, lifting the shot glass with intent, “Tonight’s the night you bless us with your take on it. Our asses have graced these stools for eight years, and not *once* have you paid your two cents to the conversation.” The base of his shot glass tapped the rim of Pius’, “Time to pony up.”

Pius rested the glass on his lower lip for a moment, allowing the aroma of whisky and mildew to fill his nostrils and tickle the base of his skull, “Have you considered that there might be a reason I don’t talk about religion?”

“We have.” Jack supplied, “And we have come to the unanimous decision that we dont give a fuck! Now talk, or I’ll tell Mindy that we aren’t really ‘bowling’.”

Pius considered the threat with the whisky still poised. What were the chances that his fiancée *actually* believed that a thirty five year old man was out bowling with the boys on a Thursday night? He supposed the rundown alley wasn't all geriatrics and retirees, but it might as well be. No, he would let this little white lie stand, just like Mindy would her weekly 'book club'.

Resigned, he tipped his head back, and the whisky slid smoothly down his throat only to cannonball into the stale fries he had eaten earlier that evening. "Fine," He sighed through the afterburn, "but if you stop wanting to hang out after this, Tom, I'm still crashing your son's birthday party. There's no way I'm missing that magic show."

Tom finished his shot as well, "Can't be worse than Jack screaming to the world that our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, didn't even exist." He kissed the gold cross hanging on its chain around his neck at the name, "Do your worst."

"Well," Pius began, "since you really want to know. I believe in God. I believe that the events in the Bible are an accurate account of the history of man."

He was interrupted by a triumphant shout accompanied by a defeated curse. Jack took a twenty dollar bill from his pocket and slammed it onto the bar in front of Pius. The bartender gave Jack a warning look while, from his other side, Tom snatched his winnings and grinned.

Pius continued, "Given that foundational belief, one of two things has to be true. Either translators and rulers and priests have changed the words to fit their needs; which would mean that we are basing our beliefs on a lie; and that lie renders our belief invalid..."

This time his opposing friends swapped roles in their interruption. The twenty was passed back to Jack along with a matching one to settle the score in Jack's favor.

"OR..." Pius pressed on, as the bartender began stalking over to them angrily, "Absolutely everything is true, and God wants us to kill all the gays, stone people who don't agree with us, and burn in a lake of fire for eternity if we don't like Him enough. If it's the former, then I can't know what kind of a person God *really* wants me to be, and the church is fucked up for thinking they're right. If it's the latter, then God is a petty asshole, and I want to talk to the fucking manager." His voice had become steadily louder as he spoke, and he could feel the skin above his nose crinkle with the snarl that was consuming it.

The bartender had reached them by now, and pressed two thick hands onto the counter, "You boys are starting to get rowdy." He told them sternly. "Keep it down, or you're done for the night. Got it?"

Pius schooled his features back to their usual position and nodded his apology to the big man, "Sorry Paul, won't happen again."

When Paul walked away, Tom took his cross between his fingers and kissed it with his eyes closed for a moment. "Alright," he admitted, "that was rough."

"Which part?" Jack laughed, "The part where he said, 'Fuck the church', or the part where he said, 'Fuck *GOD*'?" He laughed again, louder this time, "Brother, that is straight up blasphemous! Ha!"

Jack was always loud after the second drink, and they were well past that now. Pius sighed as he saw Paul throw his towel onto the bartop and turn toward them. He

watched the man's eyes turn from anger to worry at the same time that he heard several chairs screech across epoxy finished concrete.

He turned to see three men in overalls and flannel shirts. Their beer bellies strained the blue jean straps on their shoulders, and trucker hats capped each sunbaked scalp. They approached the trio of debaters with red faces and breath that smelled of cheap beer and uncooked corn. "Did I hear one of you *soy boys* say the words, 'Fuck God'?" One of them said leaning forward, "Did I hear that right?"

Pius sighed on Jack's behalf. Farmers generally considered anyone who wasn't also a farmer to be less of a man. For Pius, it didn't bother him. He was comfortable in his masculinity and his profession. He worked at the foundry in town, slinging molten steel for ten hour shifts. He didn't need this sun dried tomatoe's blessing. Jack, on the other hand, worked an office job. His hands were soft, and Pius knew for a fact that he did indeed prefer soy milk in his coffee.

As Jack rose to the bait, Pius rose with him. Without looking, he knew Tom would be facing down his own man. In a perfect world, this wouldn't devolve into violence, and Paul wouldn't have to ban them for a month like he had the last time Jack had gotten into a scuffle. To get ahead of it, Pius raised his hands placatingly and said, "Listen, gentlemen, we all know not to talk about politics and religion. It was my mistake for bringing it up. Let me buy you a drink."

The one who had spoken looked him up and down, "So it was you then? I'll not stand by while you blaspheme the Lord thy God!" His eyes widened with fervor, "Leviticus says:" His cheeks jiggled as he worked himself up into the kind of state Pius

had seen in over enthusiastic preachers as a youth, “The one who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death’!”

“Whoa!” Paul shouted, coming around the bar, “Calm down there Dan, We don't want any trouble now, do we?”

Dan was breathing heavily now, and he jabbed a finger into Pius' chest, “I don't, but this heretical *bastard* does!” He shoved with his finger so hard that Pius fell against the bar.

Jack wasted no time reaching over Pius and decking Dan in the chin. The fat farmer fell into his fellows, who threw him and themselves into a fray of flailing fists and drunken curses. Pius was caught up in the chaos, taking a few punches and giving as good as he got.

They were younger and more fit, but in the end, nothing can match the raw strength of farm boys. In short order, Tom, Jack, and Pius were thrown bodily into the street by the huffing farmers. Jack was on his feet in an instant, shouting curses at the closing door through a split lip and what Pius assumed was more than one missing tooth. Tom was with him not long after, pulling him back and trying to calm him down.

Pius decided to lie there for a moment longer, staring at the starlit sky above his small town. The whiskey was joining forces with several blows to the head to muddle his thoughts and loosen his tongue. He spoke to the starlit heavens, “It's the latter, you know.”

Tom was holding Jack by the belt to keep the smaller man from going inside for round two. They stopped their antics at his slurred words. “What?” Tom asked from the curb.

“Of the two possibilities.” Pius clarified, “whether or not the church is wrong or God is an asshole. I lean toward the latter. How petty do you have to be to damn somebody *for eternity*, just because they don’t like you the best. Good people spend their whole lives serving their fellow man. They give everything they have to charity, they feed the poor, they foster orphans, the whole shebang. But then they die and some prick says, ‘Ope! You didn’t accept Jesus into your heart! Looks like it’s eternal torment for you! Have fun!’ It’s fucked up, man.”

“Pius,” Tom tried to interrupt him.

“No! It’s fucked up!” Pius pointed at Tom from where he lay on the blacktop, “And fuck you! I’m still going to the party!”

“Pius, get up, man!” Jack put in.

“Fuck you, fuck those farmers,” he listed on fingers that doubled in his vision, “Fuck the church,” His friends were pulling on his ankles, trying to move him, but he didn’t want to move yet. They wanted so badly to know what he thought about religion, so he was going to tell them, damn it. He pointed the final finger at the sky, shouting as loud as he could through lips that were rapidly swelling, “and *FUCK GOD!*”

“Pius!”

“I said it! Fuck you God! When I get up there, you and I are gonna have words!” Both of his friends leapt back onto the sidewalk as the light that had been nagging the corner of his vision finally made sense. Too late, his body tensed up and the blaring horn of a fully loaded semi blasted his eardrums. The discomfort only lasted for an instant, as screeching rubber accompanied the horn, and the steel fender made contact with his skull.