

Finding God

When I was nineteen, I stopped believing in everything. I started reading too much Palahnuik and all my friends were gay. I went through a pack of cigarettes a day and took the Bible out of my car and stopped caring if people heard me curse. I smoked pot when I knew nothing else could make me laugh and looked at old pictures when nothing else could make me cry. For the first time in my life, I didn't know where I was going to end up when I died.

I remember the night that my dad told me he wasn't really sure if I had ever believed in the first place. He might as well have told me to go rot in hell. Just before that I had told him to stop wasting his time spouting Scripture at me. It doesn't mean anything to me, I said. How is that going to help me? I might as well have twisted a knife in his heart. All he wanted from us kids was that we were born-again, heaven-bound BFF's with Jesus. And all we wanted was for him to stop preaching long enough to notice that we had problems that prayer wasn't fixing.

I don't remember much about the day that I became a Christian, but I remember how happy it made my parents. I remember how I laid in bed awake that night, trying to remember every single sin I had committed that day. I had to confess them all or else I wasn't going to be forgiven, right? I prayed every night for weeks, just to make sure that I had said the words right. I wanted to make sure that Jesus was really in my heart. What if I died tomorrow? I didn't want to go to hell. Hell is no place for a five-year-old girl.

My guilt complex didn't stop there—it followed me my entire life. When I was sad, people would tell me to read the Bible. I would stare at the lists of scary, condemning words —liar, thief, glutton, whore, abomination-- and felt like every single one described me. I would pray and find myself wincing at every confession. Somewhere along the line I completely forgot about grace, even though it had supposedly found me.

I was baptized when I was in seventh grade. I loved God, but I was terrified of getting in front of the entire church. My church didn't let you get away with the light sprinkling—they were all about immersion. Which meant that I had to get a new bathing suit the day before. Which meant I had to wear said bathing suit in front of the entire congregation with only a flimsy white T-shirt over top. A flimsy white T-shirt that would stick to my entire body after I was dunked into the baptismal pool and proclaimed full of the Holy Spirit. I should have known then that my priorities weren't in the right place. The horrifying reality of being wet in front of a crowd consumed me more than the spiritual experience of declaring my faith in front of a body of believers.

After the service, the other baptized souls and I had to stand in the front of the church. Older members came by to shake our hands and offer us words of wisdom. It all seems a little bit ridiculous to me now. They all acted like we'd just graduated or it was our birthday or something. My parents were even throwing me a party at our house afterwards—complete with a “Happy Baptism, Emily” cake. Couldn't they just leave the rejoicing to heaven's angels and stop treating me like I'd won an award or something?

One of the elders of my church came up to me, hugged me and said something that I'll never forget. “Now the devil knows that you're really serious about being a Christian. Now things are going to get hard.”

Things did get hard. And the devil won.

I remember the day I felt like God stopped caring about me. I had developed quite the habit, and my dad had a habit of leaving his OxyContin bottles unattended. My boyfriend, Logan, had a habit too. His habit had me careful of the things I said when I was around him; it had me locked in his parents' room waiting for him to calm down. Every time he did it, it was supposed to be the last. I couldn't help but feel sorry for him as he laid there, shaking and crying, promising me that he didn't mean to scare me, hadn't meant to hurt me, wasn't going to be like his father. Like father, like son, like fists, like wrists,

like a slap to the face or a sucker punch to the ribs.

That Thursday before Driver's Ed, God left me. Too many big white pills, and I couldn't remember much about the day. Everything seemed dim and surreal, and I was drifting in and out, laying on his futon that never had sheets on it. His parents weren't home yet, but I was more interested in sleeping than doing anything else a sixteen year old might do with her boyfriend when she's in his bedroom with the door shut.

I don't remember much about it, and I've spent most of the years since it happened trying to convince myself that it didn't happen. Sometimes it works, but it's always sitting there in the back of my mind, ready to remind me that somewhere I fucked up and I must have asked for this and a good Christian girl would have known better, wouldn't have been high, wouldn't have been there, wouldn't have done the things that make seventeen year old boys want to know what actual sex is like.

His hands clamped around my wrists. He was strong for someone so skinny, someone so delicate, someone who had promised that he only wanted to make me happy for the rest of my life. His face seemed to ask me why I didn't love him enough to just cooperate. Do you know how awful it is to be naked in front of someone that you don't really know anymore? How did my underwear get off and, God, why did I still have my socks on? Do you know how hard it is to squeeze your legs closed when desperate hands are pulling them apart and you can't even decide if this is real or some kind of sick opiate-induced nightmare?

I felt like I was screaming no, but maybe I was only whispering. Does it still count? My eyes must have been clamped shut because I still don't remember what he looks like without his pants on. I just remember his sunken in chest, his knobby knees, the smooth tops of his feet, his hands with the rough knuckles that somewhere along the line stopped holding me when I was sad and started holding me down.

God must not love me. He wasn't there in that room that day. He wasn't there when Logan dumped me three days later. He wasn't there in the hospital my parents drove me to when they had no idea how else to calm me down. I fell asleep alone that night, in that tiny bed in my backless gown. I needed Him to be there—He was the only

one that knew the truth. And He was nowhere to be found.

Mental hospitals are the most godless places on earth. The walls were the type of white that sucks you in and makes you feel cold. The paintings decorating the halls were strange enough to make me feel crazier than I already was, but the people were stranger. Skin and bones girls with empty eyes walking as if each step was more difficult than the last. A young girl picking at the scabs on her arms told me, "On Saturday they have pot roast, and they let you have visitors sometimes." I angled my body away from her until I heard someone say my name.

The psychiatrist looked just like Sissy Spacek. She asked how long I had been cutting, which medications I had been on, how I felt about my numerous therapists. "Well therapy doesn't seem to be working for you, and neither does medication," she said. "I suggest we do a two week intensive in-patient treatment."

"No way," I said. "What am I supposed to say when people ask me why I haven't been in school?" I tried to explain to her that I didn't need more psychotherapy, I needed my boyfriend back.

"Well we need to help you develop better coping mechanisms." She paused. "What gives you hope when nothing else does?"

I thought for a second. "I guess God does. I mean, I know no matter what He's there and He's going to take care of me. I guess my beliefs keep me from just ending it."

She laughed at me.

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My principal directed me to the small, closet-like sound room. "I want you to go in here and pray for the rest of the day," he told me. Such a good use of tuition money, I was thinking. This is absolutely ridiculous. I went to a very strict, very legalistic Christian high school and disciplinary measures like this were not uncommon. Not only had he already taken me out of class to drone on and on about how obviously my relationship with God wasn't right and how he didn't like my attitude and how I needed to learn to trust him and my parents because they knew what was best for me, but now he was

commanding me to spend the next two hours in this cramped not-even room talking to a God that apparently I had no relationship with anyway.

He shut the door behind him, and I was left alone with the old unused amplifiers and the broken microphones. Left alone with useless equipment and the Creator of the universe. It wasn't that I didn't want to talk to God—hell, I could have really used a good chat with Him.

But I felt like a kid dropped off at a neighbor's house for a play date—forced to somehow instantly become best friends with someone that I barely knew. I didn't want that kind of friendship with God.

I wanted to bump into Him like an old friend and get to talking about old times and let Him know what had been happening in my life lately.

I didn't want to make forced small-talk pleasantries. I wanted to sit down on a comfortable couch and really be honest with Him. I didn't want this blind date prayer set-up. That didn't feel real to me.

Prayer can't be forced; it can't be mandated. It has to be real, and it has to be honest. In here, I would just feel like I was talking to the walls.

“I'd rather burn in hell than believe that your love isn't real.” I was crying and overly sentimental. This probably had to do with the empty wine bottle, but I still meant every word. Was it strange that I was talking to my ex-boyfriend Mike about his current boyfriend?

Probably. I needed him to know, though. I needed him to know that despite our conservative upbringings and those few verses in the Bible that Christians love to recite to their children and put on picket signs and talk, talk, talk to death even though they're all still cutting their hair and wearing cotton polyester blends and sleeping in the same beds as their husbands when they are on their menstrual cycles—I needed him to know, that despite those things, what he was doing was worth it.

I realized then how far I had moved from my conservative Christian background. My father could speak for days about how unnatural it was, that “men should not lay with men as they would with a woman.” That we should “hate the sin but not the sinner.” He could tell me that my friends were misguided, that he couldn't believe that he had really fallen in love with him, that he didn't understand why she wanted to

marry her one day, that they were confused and needed to study Scripture more, pray about it, ask God for deliverance from their sinful tendencies.

But my father wasn't there when Michele kissed me in the girl's bathroom after school, and she made me promise not to tell anyone she liked girls because she was afraid she'd get kicked out of our religious high school. He wasn't there when Hollie told me she was in love with Jess, and she was scared and confused but the most sure and happy she'd ever been in her life. And my dad would never understand the kind of smile that Jared put on Mike's face—the kind of smile that I never could.

I still don't understand how anyone could think that God looks at that and hates it.

I know I'm wrong about a lot of things. I know I'll never understand God. I'll never understand why He seems to disappear when I need Him the most; I'll never understand why sometimes I feel Him in the simplest of things, and I know that He's right there and He loves me. I know I want to love God better and believe in Him more, even if it's not the same way that my parents do.

God is love, and God is life.

And I feel like life isn't about where we end up or whether we follow all the rules. Life is about conversations with your best friend in the rain. Life is about lying next to the person you love and feeling so close to them that you don't even notice that your arm is falling asleep or one of your socks is still half on. Life is that feeling when your favorite song comes on and you can't help smiling because you not only know every word but you feel every word with every fiber of your being. Life is heartbreak that makes you feel alive and the sense of accomplishment when you just finish an assignment and you actually knew what you were talking about. Life is the sadness of goodbyes and the moment when you meet someone and you can tell, right then, that they are going to be someone that changes your life forever. Life is looking at pictures and realizing that the smile you had at that moment was genuine and not posed. Life is that moment when you realize your parents actually think you're smart and are proud of

the person you became, and life is when you stick your head out of the passenger seat window. Life is holding hands and remembering the way his fingertips felt and how he looked at you that time he kissed you when you were crying. Life is not being able to breathe because you miss someone so much and realizing for the first time that how you feel is so real it's almost tangible. Life is staying up all night for no reason and your body being so heavy that you're painfully aware of yourself. Life is falling into bed and pulling the covers up to your chin and that point where you get so comfortable you never want to move again. Life is how good pizza tastes when you're high or that time you drunk text someone and don't regret it because you said exactly what you needed to say. Life is your treasured pair of beat up Converse and hearing your favorite musician live for the first time and feeling like they're only singing to you. Life is staring at the sky and feeling tiny. Life is moments strung together and loving someone so much you can't put it into words and waking up one day and realizing what's important to you.

And maybe that's where we find God. In those crazy mixed up minutes of life that catch us off guard. And maybe that's what religion is-- finding God in all those things and knowing that even though we're small parts of the bigger picture, we are still so so important.