



# Born Again and Again

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I've been born again twice. The first time was in the early 1970s, in my dad's van. He talked constantly back then about how he was born again and how all of his friends were born again and how *everyone* should be born again. I was only five or so, and I couldn't understand. I asked him how it works. He hit the brakes, pulled off to the side of the road and told me to close my eyes and invite Jesus into my heart. I did. He said, "Praise God! You've been born again." I looked at my hands. I was still the same.

The second time was more of a miracle, the sort of life-changing "Voice of God" miracle people talk about in holy roller churches. I experienced it at the side of my father's grave in Mexico, sixteen years after his death, when I was a college student. It was near the end of a summer abroad, during which I'd spent most of my time working at an orphanage in Oaxaca, living among Pentecostal Christians. One day at the beginning of that summer, I was painting the walls of the cafeteria when a man asked me if I knew whether or not I would go to heaven. I didn't believe in heaven, but I lied and said I thought I would. He asked me why, and I replied that I am a good person, and I try to



treat people with kindness and respect. I was a recovering alcoholic, I told him, four years sober, thanks to God and a twelve-step program, so I figured my chances were decent. This was, of course, the wrong answer. He said the only way to get to heaven is to be born again. He told the story of Jesus's death, and how it symbolized God's love for us. We're all helpless sinners, he said. Even when we think about sin, we're sinning, and if justice is true we're going to have to suffer for those sins. I thought about how often I masturbate, and I felt a flash of fear that this habit would doom me to a life without love. I was in my early twenties and still a virgin, which was a kind of hell on earth. In other words, I was a *desperate* sinner. When the man told me that Jesus was God dying for our sins, suffering to show us that he understands how hard it is to be human, to love and forgive us, and to ease our suffering, I found myself wanting to believe. I told the man I would take a few days to think about it.

I went for walks along the hillsides near the orphanage, and I prayed. I read the Bible, too. Just a few verses. I picked it up one night when I couldn't sleep and opened it to the part in Matthew where Jesus climbs the mountain and lays down the law, where he says that great stuff about camels and eyes of needles, lilies and birds. I was taken by these words in particular: "Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, wherewithal shall we be clothed? For your heavenly father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." They still ring in my soul. Who doesn't want to believe this? Even those of us with full closets and pantries, we worry so much sometimes that it hurts. It occurred to me that if I were a Christian, I could be part of something, and that I would be taken care of. I could join a church, get active in a young-adult group,



find someone, and finally get laid. So, after several hikes and a few nights' sleep, I told the man I was ready. We prayed together. I was born again, again. It felt good, but not entirely convincing. I sinned again that night.

I got bored after a month or so at the orphanage, so I took off to explore the southern part of Mexico, visiting Mayan ruins, climbing to the tops of pyramids, and thinking about sacrifice—the stories the tour guides told about virgins offered to the gods for peace and prosperity, the story of Jesus, and my dad's death. I started to believe that his passing had brought a redemption of sorts to our family and had led me to Mexico to hear the Gospel and be saved. My jaunt ended in Minatitlán, a grungy and humid oil town near the southern coast of the Gulf of Mexico. I stood next to my dad's grave. His was a cheap headstone, made of cement, with his name written in black paint that was starting to fade. Several minutes passed before the date of his death registered in my mind. He died on October 17, 1976—twelve years to the day before I first got sober, when I woke up after a night of hard partying with a jolt, as though hands had reached out of the darkness, yanked me up and slapped me on the face, and I knew, in my sudden alertness, that I had to quit drinking and using drugs. True or not, I believed that my father's spirit pulled me out of bed that night, when I was 20 years old and living alone in renovated barn north of Steamboat Springs, Colorado. At his graveside four years later, I found confirmation in the coincidence of the numbers on the tombstone—same date, twelve years apart, one year for each step I'd taken to quit drugs and alcohol.

A tree grew out of my dad's grave. My eyes hadn't taken it in before; it blended with all the tropical overgrowth. This immediate realization of its presence felt as if the sapling had miraculously grown before my eyes, like a story in the Bible. I wandered back to the place where I was staying, and someone handed me a greeting card with a misty photo



of a baby and, in Spanish, *Because your father in heaven is watching over you*. My doubts disappeared. I was, in that moment, an avowed Christian with unshakable faith. God had spoken to me three times, and told me it's true, true, true.

My father disappeared twice after I was born, first in 1970 for a summer-long venture to the West Coast, and again a year later with a woman named Suzy, whom he got pregnant. I wasn't quite two when he left the first time. He supposedly found God on that trip, but he was still so foggy with acid and weed that he didn't have the sense to call home. After months of not hearing from him, my grandparents received a letter from one of his friends, a neighbor kid who my grandma thought was a bad influence. The friend wrote that my dad was "living on faith, not on money," that "God is looking after him," and that "if that is true, then you, his family, have nothing to worry about. "

The second time he left, he intended to be gone for good. He built a lopsided shed in the bed of a pick-up truck and headed west with Suzy. It was after this second adventure, when Suzy was far along in her pregnancy, that my dad went all-out Christian. The way my grandma tells it, all the drugs caught up with him one afternoon, and he began sprinting back and forth across a field, begging God to quiet the clamor in his head. He promised to give his life to Jesus. This was common back then. In the early 1970s, thousands and thousands of people my dad's age traded in their bongos for Bibles. They kept their long hair, beads and tie dyes, but inside they were straight as can be, born again. The movement started on the West Coast, with outreach missions in the counterculture ghettos of L.A., San Francisco and Seattle, and it spread across the United States. By 1971, Elkhart County in northern Indiana, where I was born and raised, was saturated with "Jesus Freaks," as



my uncles call them. *Look* magazine ran a feature about the phenomenon in February of that year, and *Life*, *Newsweek*, *US News & World Report* and *Rolling Stone* followed. *Time*, which had declared God dead in 1966, named Jesus “Man of the Year” in 1972, when I was four, and my dad had four years left to live.

Certainly, my grandparents were happy Dad was off drugs, but his faith was a bit much. They didn’t know what to make of it when he’d close his eyes and shout gibberish, claiming he was filled with the Holy Ghost and speaking its language. One summer evening, my grandparents decided to sit on the back patio of their house in Elkhart to have some wine. They rarely drank, and when they did they used ridiculously small glasses. My dad sat there with his arms folded across his chest and frowned at them for sinning. They were Christians, so they argued with him about the Bible, citing the part that everybody knows, when Jesus made a wine party out of a jug of water and a loaf of bread. But my dad wasn’t having it. He countered with the bit about the body being a temple. So my grandparents changed the subject and sipped from their tiny goblets.

They thought they’d escaped this sort of dogma decades earlier, long before my dad was born. They were Mennonites; the communities they grew up in were strict and austere and self-righteously humble. My grandpa grew up in the southeast corner of Iowa, near a town called Wayland. His mother died in 1922 when a train struck the car she was riding in, and his father went on to marry a Catholic woman who had been divorced from a previous marriage. This was such a sacrilege that he was ostracized and the stigma of his sin stuck to my grandfather, who was just a boy at the time. Grandpa survived adolescence with a single-minded aim: leave and never look back. He went to college, a Mennonite one in Goshen, Indiana, where he met my grandmother, who was also raised in a proper Mennonite family, on a farm in central Illinois. She was



game to break away and explore the modern world. Their courtship unfolded at the start of World War II, in which my grandfather served as a conscientious objector with other men who took the “thou shalt not kill” commandment at face value. After the war, they bought a corner lot in a bulldozed corn field, built a flat-roof house with glass walls facing south, planted flowers and trees all around, and had three boys.

They were determined to, as my grandma says, “do things right.” They read all the Dr. Spock books, and they dragged their three sons to Goshen College Mennonite Church every week and made them go to Sunday school, and all they got out of it, it seems, was the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, when their boys went shaggy and wild. Even in salvation the kids were crazy. After the birth of their second grandchild—who, like me, was conceived out of wedlock—my grandparents pushed for my father to do the sensible, modern thing, and settle down with Suzy. On the day when my dad was going to propose to her, though, a couple of his new Christian friends stopped by and drove him to their church, Zion Temple, which was then just an old house in the neighborhood south of the tracks in Elkhart. They opened their Bibles to Matthew and read to him the part where Jesus told the Pharisees, “Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

So my dad abandoned a second family, this time in the name of God. Still in his early twenties, he resigned himself to a life of celibacy and a stubborn denial that he’d fathered a second child. His church bought him a truck, and he headed south, into Mexico and Central America, to work as a missionary. He wrote hundreds of letters on these journeys, and he made carbon copies of each one. After he died, my grandma collected them in a three-ring binder. She gave them to me after my grandpa died. In most, he kept up a pious appearance, with long self-righteous missives about



scripture. But in a few to his closest friends he admitted that he was having a hard time living without sex. In one letter he wrote about his neighbor's daughter, whom he described as "the most beautiful girl I think I've ever been around." He wrote, "The conflict is always present. I need the Lord to change the situation or at least reveal something to me or change my make-up, because I am certainly not a natural eunuch."

To this day my grandmother remains convinced that fundamentalism killed my father. She saw him as the kind of man who needed a woman in his life, to help him pay attention to little details, like wearing a hat in the hot sun. Reading the letters now, thinking back to my own trip to Mexico, when I was in my mid-twenties, lonely and terribly horny, and feeling ashamed for both, I'm inclined to agree with her. The letters point toward his death. He comes across as tired, forsaken and scatter-brained, the sun and humidity bearing down on him as he worked double-time to ready the church for a big meeting. It was the hot season in central Mexico, and he was repairing a roof of corrugated steel when he lost his footing and fell forty feet onto concrete, head first.

I was eight years old when my dad died. We traveled for a day and half to get to Minatitlán—three flights and an overnight stay in Mexico City. All the buildings there were made of cement and most had sheet-metal roofs. At night, mosquitoes descended on us and their bites made me shout because they were as sharp as bee stings. They didn't fix up my dad's body for the funeral. Bruises covered his face and some sort of green goop protruded from his mouth. My grandparents told me it was to keep his body from rotting. When I saw it I screamed. The service went on for hours, with an accordion player and a procession of men who testified in Spanish and in tongues. Their sweaty faces shined under the florescent lights, and the smell of



their too-sweet cologne clung to the air. My grandpa stood at the pulpit and stammered for a while, but the only words from his eulogy that remain with me are “chip off the old block.” During the intermission, I played soccer in the rutted street in front of the church with all the church kids, laughing and carrying on. When the services resumed, and I looked again at my dad’s battered body, I wailed some more. I cried not so much for the loss as for seeing up close what a killed person looks like, and realizing just how bad God can make you suffer.

Honestly, I didn’t much like my dad. He split before I’d begun to form memories, and when he returned he was a religious zealot. I’m not sure if that “spare the rod, spoil the child” business is in the Bible, but he acted as if it was. He spanked hard. And the things he considered to be sins! I once overheard him telling a friend that he didn’t like a particular Christian group because they were rock ‘n’ roll, and rock ‘n’ roll is a sin. I loved rock ‘n’ roll. I could sing along with all the top-40 songs. One time I was on a road trip with him and my uncle, and to bide the time I sang pop songs to myself in the back seat. I guess I was singing too loudly, because they turned around and asked what I was doing, and I was terrified that my dad might beat me.

I remember thinking that Christianity is about pretending that you’re perfect, and that if this phony perfection meant no more Elton John, I wanted no part of it.

When I got back from the funeral in Mexico and returned to my elementary school in Indiana, people were uncharacteristically nice to me. One very cute girl gave me a cookie. Teachers told my story, with me sitting right there in the class, as a way to make some important point. But it didn’t last. I went right back to being a misfit. By decade’s end, at the age of twelve, I feared girls, felt ugly, and I smoked pot constantly with my buddy Andy, who was a fiend for heavy metal. We drew pictures of demons. One night when we were really high, we turned off all the lights





in his grandma's basement, faced a mirror and proceeded to say, "I hate you bloody Mary!" three times because we'd heard that the devil would appear if we did. We got scared when the darkness began to take shape, and stopped at two. By the time I reached high school, I was into acid and drinking hard liquor every night. I had a red T-shirt with the word "SATIN" written across the front. It was meant to say "SATAN," but the kid who bought it for me, as a Christmas present, misspelled it. Word got around that I was a Satan worshipper because my dad died building a church, and I did nothing to dispel the myth.

Still, part of me believed that my dad was an angel and he was watching me. He saw my every bong hit, was hovering by the ceiling when I watched my first porno, and he wasn't at all happy about it. To this day, I half-believe that it was his hand that reached across the void when I was twenty, on the twelve-year anniversary of his death, and grabbed me and shook me into sobriety.

Since then, it's been nothing but death and rebirth for me. Not just the graveside miracle in Mexico, but also when I returned to the States a few months later to live among rich Christians who prayed for raises and new cars, and, still without a girlfriend, I took it all as bullshit. I worked through all the twelve steps—gave my life to God in the third step, confessed my sins in the fifth, made amends for the ninth and vowed to help others in the twelfth—only to wind up drinking and smoking pot again. This is the opposite of testimony, even though, despite all my falling, I'll always be a Christian, if only in the most tenuous, cultural sense. You could almost call it a superstition. For instance, I still give money to panhandlers because it might be Jesus come to test me. Jesus is the reason for the lilies all around my yard. Because it's so obviously true, all that stuff about dying in order to live—sacrifice and generosity and forgiveness and honesty and all the righteous abstractions we can never



fully live up to, but God loves us just the same. What else is there to believe?

I was almost born again again a few years ago, when I was working on a big journalism project about a mixed-race, inner-city, Pentecostal megachurch, and I started going native. I live in one of the most segregated cities in the country, so this church seemed to be big news indeed—a miracle. It's famous around here for its apocalyptic Christmas pageant, complete with pyrotechnics, real guns with blanks and a flying Jesus. Their choir mesmerized me. When they sang—all of them up there behind the pulpit in their matching robes, blacks and whites and all the colors of the east and south hemispheres, and all ranges of net worth—I felt as though I'd stepped into an alternate America. The dream had come true.

Bush's re-election in 2004 propelled me toward this church with a pen in my hand and a notebook stuffed in my back pocket. A groundswell of support from born-again Christians had lifted him into office, and pundits were saying America had voted with its moral conscience. "Just look at the exit polls," National Public Radio's Juan Williams said a couple days after the election. "They indicate that the number-one issue was morality." The Bush administration didn't make much progress on the morality issues Williams was talking about—abortion, stem-cell research, same-sex marriage. Yet he excelled at making the rich richer and the poor poorer, and lying our way into war and giving the go ahead for torture—all things that, it seems to me, Jesus would most definitely not do. All through this dark time I kept thinking about a Christian kid I'd sat next to on a flight from Kansas City during election season. He supported Bush, but we wound up arguing about the notion that the gate between heaven and hell hinges on being born again—not greed or generosity or love or lying or even murder. I argued that it made Jesus seem like an egomaniac and his followers like prideful

conformists—all traits I tend to associate with sin. To me this seems the definition of false prophecy. I said to my grandma once, “I think a lot of what passes for Christianity is a satanic perversion of the Gospel.” She replied, “I’ll take you one step further. I think all religion is.”

She’s right, I thought, but I still felt as though it doesn’t have to be. I had hope for Jesus. I was keen on a different part of the Bible at that time, the part where “a mighty sound” and “cloven tongues like as of fire” descended on the early Christians on the day of the Pentecost, and they “began to speak with other tongues” and they were “all with one accord.” I especially liked that part—all with one accord. I thought it would make a great title for a book. I wanted to believe in the peaceful unity Christianity seems to promise, and I thought I might find it in a mixed-race church.

One April weekend in 2006, a world-traveling preacher paid a visit to the church. He claimed to be a cured homosexual, a concept I don’t believe in. He was just like an old-time Bible thumper, shouting and pounding the pulpit, but with just a little bit of swish mixed in. When he’s not preaching, he said, he makes Christian electronica, to save lost souls in dance clubs. His sermon was the same old story: Jesus is the only way to salvation. Just like in Mexico years earlier, when I was born again for the second time, I was vulnerable, as, I’ve come to realize, I always will be. I wasn’t lonely like I’d been when I was a college kid bumming around with Christians in Mexico; I’d found someone. But love was harder than I thought. I still hated myself for some of the very same things I’ve always hated myself for. I wanted to believe what this man was saying. I wanted to be saved.

My want burned with such intensity that I ignored what was actually being said, and it nearly destroyed my marriage before we’d said our vows, before I’d even proposed to Allie. I begged her to come to the church and

hear the formerly gay preacher. She sat somewhere near the back by a couple of black men in suits who were going on and on about how disgusting gay people are. My wife's parents were part of the Jesus People Movement, same as my dad, and they raised her in a church that was later outed as a cult. When I told her I wanted to join the church she said, "You know this is a deal breaker for me." We fought all weekend and came so close to ending our relationship that at one point she burst into tears, grabbed our dog and said, "I don't want to lose Gobo!" But she hung in there, thank God, and kept asking me questions, and bit by bit the rapture unraveled. She asked me if I believe that gays are sinners bound for hell, and the answer was no. She asked if we were doomed for having sex before marriage, and the answer was I don't know and I don't care. She wondered if I could really believe, as the members of this church did, that evolution is a lie, that the abortion debate is about life and not misogyny, or that everyone who is not born again is going to hell, even Buddhists and Jews and people who live in some distant jungle where a missionary from Oklahoma has yet to arrive.

The answers were no, no, and no.