

Jennifer Fulwiler

SOMETHING

OTHER

THAN

GOD



*How I Passionately Sought Happiness  
and Accidentally Found It*

IGNATIUS





*Something Other Than God*



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Cover detail from *The Holy Spirit* alabaster window  
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*To Papaw, who always believed.*

*All that we call human history . . . [is] the long, terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.*

— C. S. Lewis

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My counselor at an East Texas summer camp stepped along the gravel ground, asking us if we wanted to accept the Lord Jesus into our hearts. As she worked her way down the line of girls next to me, I used the time to try to think of a better answer than “no”. Luckily, I was at the end of the group, seated on the edge of the picnic table where we’d been lined up like bottles in a carnival game. But our counselor was moving quickly.

She planted herself in front of my friend Jessica, who’d also come to camp with me and a big group of fifth graders from our neighborhood. Jessica was from one of the rare families that didn’t go to church every Sunday, so I watched the exchange intently. Surely, she would take one for the team and tell this religious nut to back off.

The counselor, whom we knew only by her nickname, “Tippy”, took a deep breath before speaking. She placed her hands on Jessica’s bare knees, just below her flowered Jammer shorts. “Jessica”, she said. “Jessica, do you want to accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?”

All the other girls leaned in, their heads cocked. Jessica looked at us, then at Tippy.

She started to say something, but faltered. I nodded in sympathy. This wouldn’t be easy. “I . . . yes! I’m ready! I want to make Jesus the Lord of my life!” she cried. The other girls erupted into squeals and applause, everyone clobbering Jessica with hugs and pats on the back.

Then they looked at me.

“Jenny”, Tippy said. The other girls’ celebration died down to wait for their next victory. “Look me in the eyes, Jenny.”

I looked up. Her eyeballs glistened with emotion; her chin quivered.

“Jenny, are you 100 percent certain you’re going to heaven when you die?”

“That’s a big question . . .” I tried to buy time. I squirmed and shifted under the pressure of the other girls’ gazes.

Though it was of no use to me at that moment, I couldn't help but fixate on the fact that advertisements for Pine Grove summer camp specifically said that you didn't have to be a Christian to attend—which is the only reason my parents let me go in the first place. The slick pamphlets my friends handed me at school boasted color pictures of smiling children water skiing and horseback riding. There were no photos of religious interrogation in the brochure.

“Has the Lord been speaking to your heart?” Tippy wanted to know.

There were so many confusing things about that question that I didn't even know how to begin to answer. I was pretty sure that “the Lord” referred to Jesus, who was a guy who used to live in the Middle East, but then it was also sometimes used to refer to God, who was the invisible ghost who lived in the sky. It was impossible to keep the details of their mythology straight. On top of that, I had no idea how one would go about speaking to a person's heart. I considered suggesting that the Lord speak to my ear in the future, but this was no time for jokes.

“He, umm, I'm not really sure . . .” I said. I averted my eyes, looking off toward the towering pecan tree over her shoulder.

“Do you want to get saved?”

“See, I, uh . . .”

She stepped into the path of my gaze. “If you do not get saved, you will not go to heaven. You will end up in hell. Forever. You don't want to go to hell, do you, Jenny?”

Another tough question. I needed more information about this place before I could make an informed decision. I didn't believe in heaven or hell, but even if I were to pretend that I did, I wasn't sure that hell sounded all that bad. Several religious people had assured me that my family and I were going there, and they said it was a terrible place. But so far the only thing I knew about it was that people like them weren't there. For all I knew, I might like it.

I glanced at Jessica, who was leaning against the girl next to her, overcome with the emotion of her big moment. Traitor.

“This is it, Jenny”, Tippy said. “Will you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?”

I would've been happy to lie and give the answer that would be most likely to increase my popularity within the cabin, but it might backfire. I was afraid she'd start quizzing me about the details of how I'd been communicating with Jesus, and I'd screw it up. My friends seemed to use

their imaginations to picture that Jesus gave them detailed instructions about their daily lives, but I didn't know what the boundaries were for those kinds of fantasies. Could I say that Jesus wrote me a note? Or that he left a message on our answering machine? I didn't know. It would be better to try to worm my way out of this one.

"Can I think about it?" I offered hesitantly.

One of the girls gasped. Another shook her head and turned away.

Tippy held her gaze firm. "I've never had a girl in one of my cabins not get saved." She made one more glassy-eyed appeal, assuring me that she was deeply concerned about my burning in hell for eternity.

I could feel blotchy red spots breaking out all over my face. Mostly, it was from embarrassment. But there was something else fueling it as well: an angry certainty that this counselor should be ashamed of her belief system. I was a good person, more or less. Sure, there was that time I snuck into the classroom at recess and poured glue into a classmate's desk, and then let a kid I didn't like take the blame for it. In general, though, I was at least as nice as anyone else sitting on that bench. I might have been only eleven years old, but even I could recognize that worshipping a deity who sends nice people to hell is nothing to be proud of.

Tippy eventually came to the conclusion that I was beyond saving and announced that it was time to go back to the cabin. The next day was Jessica's big moment. She and Tippy left to go do whatever was involved with "getting saved", and when they returned, everyone flooded outside to celebrate the world's newest Christian. I stayed in my bunk. The bedding had been stripped since it was our last day, so I lay on the bare plastic mattress. The racket of the old window air conditioner unit wasn't quite loud enough to drown out my cabinmates' squeals and giggles outside.

Before that moment, I'd never defined myself by my views on religion. I grew up aware of the obvious fact that the physical world around us is all there is, and it never occurred to me that such a normal outlook even needed its own word. But as I listened to the giggles and yelps of the girls through the closed cabin door, I realized that my beliefs differed so radically and fundamentally from other people's beliefs that it would impact every area of my life. For the first time, I assigned to myself a label, a single word that defined me: *atheist*. The concept settled within me as perfectly as puzzle pieces snapping into place, and for the first time in days, I broke into a broad, exuberant smile.

“She got what? Got ‘saved’? What is that?” my mom said into the phone. It was the Monday after I returned to my home in suburban Dallas, and Jessica’s mom had called to report what had happened at camp. After they were finished talking, my mom turned to me. “Did you do it?”

I froze with a forkful of syrup-soaked waffles halfway to my mouth.

I was pretty sure that the correct answer would be “no”, but I wasn’t positive. My mom could be unpredictable about this kind of thing. On the one hand, she strongly disapproved of people pushing their religion on others. She came from the Northeast, a place where evidently it was not common for people to ask one another to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior as part of casual conversation. Unlike my dad, my mom wasn’t an atheist; agnostic probably wasn’t even the right word. She considered spirituality to be a private matter and seemed to see the particulars of religious dogma as irrelevant. She and I didn’t talk about religion, but if we did, she probably would have said that what matters most is simply being a good person. Why wait for the rules of a religious belief system to tell you how to treat others with love?

But even though she wasn’t religious, and she didn’t seem to have a problem with my dad’s atheism, I would occasionally find out the hard way that she harbored a certain respect for religion. When our public school invited a Christian group to offer pocket-sized Bibles to students, I grabbed one from the stack to use for arts and crafts projects. At home, I tore out some pages, cut them into little stars and hearts, and glued them to poster board as part of a collage that now hung on the main wall in my room.

When my dad noticed it, he thought it was creative. When my mom walked in with an overflowing basket to put away my clean clothes, she gasped when she saw my artwork, almost dropping the laundry. She stared at it as if I’d spray painted swastikas on my wall and told me in no uncertain terms that I was not to cut up any more Bibles.

So, what was the right answer about getting saved? Was it bad etiquette not to accept someone's religious figure as the Lord of your life? Not able to think of any lie that would guarantee a good response, I just told the truth: "No?" I waited for her response.

"Thank God", she said and shook her head. "I'm sorry they pressured you like that. It's deplorable."

I sighed and resumed chewing my waffles.

After I finished breakfast, my mom whisked my dishes to the sink, slid her watch onto her wrist, and left for the optometry office where she worked part-time as a bookkeeper. We said goodbye, and I went to call one of my friends to see if she wanted to get together. I stopped in mid-stride. All of the kids from the neighborhood were gathering for a Bible study that afternoon, so they wouldn't be available.

We'd only been back from camp for a few days, but a distinct chill had descended on my relationship with my friends. It seemed that summer camp had strengthened all of us in our beliefs: them in their Christianity, and me in my atheism.

For years, I'd strongly suspected that other people's belief in God was preventing me from climbing the elementary school social ladder. When my dad's latest construction project management job took us to Dallas, just before I entered third grade, I'd been certain that this was the place where I would finally take my rightful place as the queen of popularity. I pictured pajama-clad friends packing my couch at sleepovers, all of us giggling at inside jokes while tossing popcorn at one another. At school we would gather in the halls between classes, recognizable by our matching acid-washed blue jean jackets, hushing our conversations when the poor fools in lower social circles walked by, so that they wouldn't hear any confidential in-crowd information.

Things had not gone according to plan, and I was certain that it had nothing to do with the fact that my height left a few inches of white skin perpetually visible between the bottom of my pegged pants and my neon-pink socks. My attempts at teasing my bangs into poofy perfection ended up looking more like I was wearing a failed taxidermy experiment on my forehead, and my self-consciously stooped posture and size 9 shoes inspired my classmates to call me "Bigfoot" so frequently that new students didn't even know my real first name. Still, I saw no reason why any of this would prevent the popular kids from wanting to spend lots of time with me. Other people's religious

hang-ups were the only possible explanation for the fact that I could count my friends on one hand.

There had been tension surrounding this issue from the first day we'd moved into the neighborhood, when two families stopped by and asked us where we went to church. My first day at school, I was asked the same question four more times. My excuse that we were "still looking for a church home" had been getting less effective since we hadn't managed to find one in three years. Now, thanks to the camp debacle, it was all out on the table: We didn't go to church. We were never going to church. We were not a Christian family. And now, I had no one to hang out with.

I spent the next couple of weeks roaming through the house, haunted by the absence of my friends who were off at Bible studies. We used to pass hours together while our parents were at work. Our favorite pastime was prank calling the Home Shopping network, and we rejoiced when Jessica's brother convinced the operator to put him on the air so that he could yell "FART ON MY BUTT!" on national television before they disconnected the call. We spent entire afternoons dancing around my living room, flailing our heads and jerking our arms to the *Dirty Dancing* soundtrack. Now my friends had traded all of that wholesome fun for religious brainwashing activities, and I was alone.

\* \* \*

My dad tapped on my open bedroom door and came in for our nightly reading session. He settled onto the bed next to me and picked up our current book from my bedside table, Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*. We'd begun reading it just before I went to camp, the timing of which was probably not a coincidence. He cracked the hardcover book open, smoothed the pages flat, and prepared to read from the chapter about Johannes Kepler's work calculating Mars' orbit. He paused, shifted uncomfortably, then closed it.

"There's something important I want to talk to you about", he said.

Whatever it was must have been big, since he was the king of understatement. My dad lived most of his childhood in the jungles of Mexico, where he and his friends regularly carried guns in their daily wanderings, the threat of running into a bandit or a jaguar ever-present. As an adult he was a Special Forces demolition instructor and high-altitude

parachute jumpmaster, and later in life he became an engineer. The man was wired for cool, logical thinking, so the fact that I saw a slight wrinkle in his brow caught my attention.

“I heard you got a lot of pressure from the religious kids at camp. Does that kind of thing happen a lot? At school, or with your friends?”

“Usually they just call me a Satan worshipper.”

He nodded slightly and thought for a moment. “Let me tell you a story”, he said. He recounted the events of Christopher Columbus’ shipwreck of 1503 in what is now Jamaica. The natives had grown tired of the Europeans’ constant demands for supplies and had stopped sharing their resources. Columbus saw in an almanac that a lunar eclipse was coming up, and dramatically announced to the natives that his God was so enraged with them that he’d cover the moon with blood and snatch it from the sky. A few nights later, at the exact moment Columbus had predicted, the moon turned red; unbeknownst to the natives, the earth had moved in front of the sun and its atmosphere tinted its rays. Then the earth moved into position to block out the sun’s light altogether, and the moon disappeared. Pandemonium ensued, and the panic-stricken natives offered Columbus whatever he wanted if he would please ask his God to forgive them and give the moon back.

“That’s kind of awesome”, I snickered.

“Not if you’re one of the Indians!” my dad said.

“Well, that’s true.”

“And that’s the thing: The Indians weren’t stupid; they just didn’t have the same knowledge Columbus did.” He looked over at me and nudged my leg with his index finger to emphasize: “What happened with Columbus is a nutshell of the whole history of religion. People realized early on that if you fill in the gaps of other people’s ignorance by saying it’s the work of some god, and then claim that you’re in tight with that particular god, you have almost unlimited power as long as people believe it.”

“Wow.”

He thought for a moment, choosing his words carefully since whatever he said might be repeated with the opener, “Yeah, well, *my dad says* ...” next time I got in a playground spat with my religious friends.

“Belief in gods and angels and stuff like that is a comfort to some people”, he continued. “I don’t blame them for that. It’s okay. It makes

them feel good. I just don't like to see them pushing other people into it, especially when it's my kid."

"It's not like I'd—"

"Just make sure you don't fall into that. Make sure you don't start believing things just because someone says it's true, even if it's coming from me. Question everything."

Did my own father really think I was that stupid? My expression must have revealed my thoughts, because he threw up his hands in playful defensiveness. "I know. I know! I'm just telling you that things will change as you get older. When you're an adult, your life won't be easy like it is now. You might be surprised at how tempting it is to believe whatever will make things easier."

"Okay", I said, drawing out the word to indicate that his advice was unnecessary.

He opened *Cosmos* back up and flipped to the previous page to make sure we didn't miss anything. He began reading, his words softened by a touch of a Texas accent. I sunk back into his shoulder, leaned on his arm, and listened to my dad's gentle voice tell me of the wonders of the universe.