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BLUE

LIKE

JAZZ

NONRELIGIOUS THOUGHTS ON CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Magic

The Problem with Romeo

I've been to a play. It was *Romeo and Juliet*, and I took a date.
It was my first date ever. Even though I never wanted to act

myself, taking a girl to a play was a good move. My date sat so close to me I could hear her nose breaths. She felt warm like sunlight and soft like she used special soap.

Even though it is a good move to take a girl to a play, I screwed it up.

There is a part in the play where Juliet, the main girl, is standing on a balcony and Romeo, the main guy, is hiding in the bushes below. It is pretty tense because Juliet is going on about how she likes Romeo, but she doesn't know Romeo is in the bushes. It was great at first. My date scrunched in so close I could feel the softness of her side, the smoothness of her arms wrapped around mine. I thought what the actors were saying was pretty mushy, but I would make noises every few minutes as if they had said something beautiful. When I did this my date would glance at me in wonder. It is a pretty good idea to make some noises when you are at a play.

My date was wrapped up in the whole love theme, but I wasn't buying it. I didn't let on, I just wasn't buying a lot of the crap they were saying. Juliet kept going on about how Romeo should deny his family, and Romeo was like, Duh, okay. Then Juliet told Romeo that he smelled like a rose. Duh, okay, he said.

And then the key lines, the lines on which I now know the play hinges:

Romeo: Call me but love, and I'll be new baptiz'd;
Henceforth I never will be Romeo.

Later in the play they accidentally kill themselves. It was not very believable but that is what happened. My date was crying. I was thinking they got what they deserved. It seemed stupid to me. I didn't understand everything they were talking about, but what I did understand I thought must have been written for

girls. People really should put a limit on how much they give to emotion. When we were walking out my date clasped my hand, and even though I wasn't feeling very mushy I smiled at her. We ascended the aisle and made our way through the crowded lobby onto the steps of the playhouse. There were girls everywhere, all of them misty-eyed. Two girls in front of us were talking to each other. One of them threw her arms in the air and cried out, *I wish I could know love like Romeo and Juliet!*

I couldn't take it anymore. I whispered under my breath, *They're dead.*

I didn't think anybody heard me, but my date did. Two girls next to us heard me also, and they told the people next to them. One idiot guy repeated what I said and laughed, pointing at me. All the girls looked at me like I had just stepped on a cat. My date's body grew cold. She let go of my hand. She crossed her arms over her chest and walked a few feet in front of me all the way back to the truck. On the way home she hugged the far door so tightly I thought she was going to fall out. When we got to her house I asked her if she would like to go out again.

"I don't think so," she said.

"Why?"

"I don't think I could like you."

"Why?"

"I just don't."

"Can we kiss? I hear that helps a girl fall in love."

"You are evil," she said. "The Antichrist!"

She went into her house, shutting the door firmly on our relationship. I honestly never liked her in the first place. She was pretty and all, but I never liked her deeply. I was only a little sad about it.

My mother had given me her Texaco card for my date, so on the way home I stopped in for some Cheetos and donuts. I sat in

the Texaco parking lot and thought about poor old Romeo, begging for love, running off with his woman, and then accidentally dying. Some dates go terrible, it's a fact. If you would have asked me then, I would have told you he was doomed from the beginning. I figured he was doomed because he believed in magic. He believed hooking up with Juliet would make him new, change his name, have him baptized and shiny.

Everybody wants to be fancy and new. Nobody wants to be themselves. I mean, maybe people want to be themselves, but they want to be different, with different clothes or shorter hair or less fat. It's a fact. If there was a guy who just liked being himself and didn't want to be anybody else, that guy would be the most different guy in the world and everybody would want to be him.

One night, when I was watching television, I saw an infomercial about a knife that could cut through a boot and remain sharp enough to slice a tomato. They called it the Miracle Blade. Another night I saw a cleanser made with orange juice that could get blood out of carpet. They said it worked like magic.

The whole idea of everybody wanting to be somebody new was an important insight in terms of liking God. God was selling something I wanted. Still, God was in the same boat as the guy selling the knives and Juliet promising to make Romeo new. Everybody exaggerates when they are selling something. Everybody says their product works like magic. At the time I understood God's offer as a magical proposition, which it is. But most magical propositions are just tricks. The older you get, the harder it is to believe in magic. The older you get, the more you understand there is no Wizard of Oz, just a schmuck behind a curtain. I pictured my pastor as a salesman or a magician, trying to trick the congregation into believing Jesus could make us new. And, honestly, I felt as though he was trying to convince himself, as though he only half believed what he was saying. It's

not that Christian spirituality seemed like a complete con, it's just that it had some of those elements.

The message, however, was appealing to me. God said he would make me new. I can't pretend for a second I didn't want to be made new, that I didn't want to start again. I did.

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There were aspects of Christian spirituality I liked and aspects I thought were humdrum. I wasn't sure what to do. I felt I needed to make a decision about what I believed. I wished I could have subscribed to aspects of Christianity but not the whole thing.

I'll explain.

I associated much of Christian doctrine with children's stories because I grew up in church. My Sunday school teachers had turned Bible narrative into children's fables. They talked about Noah and the ark because the story had animals in it. They failed to mention that this was when God massacred all of humanity.

It also confused me that some people would look at parts of the Bible but not the whole thing. They ignored a lot of obvious questions. I felt as if Christianity, as a religious system, was a product that kept falling apart, and whoever was selling it would hold the broken parts behind his back trying to divert everybody's attention.

The children's story stuff was the thing I felt Christians were holding behind their back. The Garden of Eden, the fall of man, was a pretty silly story, and Noah and the ark, all of that, that seemed pretty fairy-tale too.

It took me a while to realize that these stories, while often used with children, are not at all children's stories. I think the devil has tricked us into thinking so much of biblical theology is story fit for kids. How did we come to think the story of Noah's

ark is appropriate for children? Can you imagine a children's book about Noah's ark complete with paintings of people gasping in gallons of water, mothers grasping their children while their bodies go flying down white-rapid rivers, the children's tiny heads being bashed against rocks or hung up in fallen trees? I don't think a children's book like that would sell many copies.

I couldn't give myself to Christianity because it was a religion for the intellectually naive. In order to believe Christianity, you either had to reduce enormous theological absurdities into children's stories or ignore them. The entire thing seemed very difficult for my intellect to embrace. Now none of this was quite defined; it was mostly taking place in my subconscious.

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Help came from the most unlikely of sources. I was taking a literature course in college in which we were studying the elements of story: setting, conflict, climax, and resolution.

The odd thought occurred to me while I was studying that we didn't know where the elements of story come from. I mean, we might have a guy's name who thought of them, but we don't know why they exist. I started wondering why the heart and mind responded to this specific formula when it came to telling stories. So I broke it down. Setting: That was easy; every story has a setting. My setting is America, on earth. I understand setting because I experience setting. I am sitting in a room, in a house, I have other characters living in this house with me, that sort of thing. The reason my heart understood setting was because I experienced setting.

But then there was conflict. Every good story has conflict in it. Some conflict is internal, some is external, but if you want to write a novel that sells, you have to have conflict. We understand conflict

because we experience conflict, right? But where does conflict come from? Why do we experience conflict in our lives? This helped me a great deal in accepting the idea of original sin and the birth of conflict. The rebellion against God explained why humans experienced conflict in their lives, and nobody knows of any explanation other than this. This last point was crucial. I felt like I was having an epiphany. Without the Christian explanation of original sin, the seemingly silly story about Adam and Eve and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, there was no explanation of conflict. At all. Now some people process the account of original sin in the book of Genesis as metaphor, as symbolism for something else that happened; but whether you take it metaphorically or literally, this serves as an adequate explanation of the human struggle that every person experiences: loneliness, crying yourself to sleep at night, addiction, pride, war, and self-addiction. The heart responds to conflict within story, I began to think, because there is some great conflict in the universe with which we are interacting, even if it is only in the subconscious. If we were not experiencing some sort of conflict in our lives, our hearts would have no response to conflict in books or film. The idea of conflict, of having tension, suspense, or an enemy, would make no sense to us. But these things do make sense. We understand these elements because we experience them. As much as I did not want to admit it, Christian spirituality explained why.

And then the element of story known as climax. Every good story has a climax. Climax is where a point of decision determines the end of the story. Now this was starting to scare me a little bit. If the human heart uses the tools of reality to create elements of story, and the human heart responds to climax in the structure of story, this means that climax, or point of decision, could very well be something that exists in the universe. What I mean is that there is a decision the human heart needs

to make. The elements of story began to parallel my understanding of Christian spirituality. Christianity offered a decision, a climax. It also offered a good and a bad resolution. In part, our decisions were instrumental to the way our story turned out.

Now this was spooky because for thousands of years big-haired preachers have talked about the idea that we need to make a decision, to follow or reject Christ. They would offer these ideas as a sort of magical solution to the dilemma of life. I had always hated hearing about it because it seemed so entirely unfashionable a thing to believe, but it did explain things. Maybe these unfashionable ideas were pointing at something mystical and true. And, perhaps, I was judging the idea, not by its merit, but by the fashionable or unfashionable delivery of the message.

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A long time ago I went to a concert with my friend Rebecca. Rebecca can sing better than anybody I've ever heard sing. I heard this folksinger was coming to town, and I thought she might like to see him because she was a singer too. The tickets were twenty bucks, which is a lot to pay if you're not on a date. Between songs, though, he told a story that helped me resolve some things about God. The story was about his friend who is a Navy SEAL. He told it like it was true, so I guess it was true, although it could have been a lie.

The folksinger said his friend was performing a covert operation, freeing hostages from a building in some dark part of the world. His friend's team flew in by helicopter, made their way to the compound and stormed into the room where the hostages had been imprisoned for months. The room, the folksinger said, was filthy and dark. The hostages were curled up in a corner, terrified. When the SEALs entered the room, they heard the gasps of the

hostages. They stood at the door and called to the prisoners, telling them they were Americans. The SEALs asked the hostages to follow them, but the hostages wouldn't. They sat there on the floor and hid their eyes in fear. They were not of healthy mind and didn't believe their rescuers were really Americans.

The SEALs stood there, not knowing what to do. They couldn't possibly carry everybody out. One of the SEALs, the folksinger's friend, got an idea. He put down his weapon, took off his helmet, and curled up tightly next to the other hostages, getting so close his body was touching some of theirs. He softened the look on his face and put his arms around them. He was trying to show them he was one of them. None of the prison guards would have done this. He stayed there for a little while until some of the hostages started to look at him, finally meeting his eyes. The Navy SEAL whispered that they were Americans and were there to rescue them. Will you follow us? he said. The hero stood to his feet and one of the hostages did the same, then another, until all of them were willing to go. The story ends with all the hostages safe on an American aircraft carrier.

I never liked it when the preachers said we had to follow Jesus. Sometimes they would make Him sound angry. But I liked the story the folksinger told. I liked the idea of Jesus becoming man, so that we would be able to trust Him, and I like that He healed people and loved them and cared deeply about how people were feeling.

When I understood that the decision to follow Jesus was very much like the decision the hostages had to make to follow their rescuer, I knew then that I needed to decide whether or not I would follow Him. The decision was simple once I asked myself, *Is Jesus the Son of God, are we being held captive in a world run by Satan, a world filled with brokenness, and do I believe Jesus can rescue me from this condition?*

If life had a climax, which it must in order for the element of climax to be mirrored in story, then Christian spirituality was offering a climax. It was offering a decision.

The last element of story is resolution. Christian spirituality offered a resolution, the resolution of forgiveness and a home in the afterlife. Again, it all sounded so very witless to me, but by this time I wanted desperately to believe it. It felt as though my soul were designed to live the story Christian spirituality was telling. I felt like my soul wanted to be forgiven. I wanted the resolution God was offering.

And there it was: setting, conflict, climax, and resolution. As silly as it seemed, it met the requirements of the heart and it matched the facts of reality. It felt more than true, it felt meaningful. I was starting to believe I was a character in a greater story, which is why the elements of story made sense in the first place.

The magical proposition of the gospel, once free from the clasps of fairy tale, was very adult to me, very gritty like something from Hemingway or Steinbeck, like something with copious amounts of sex and blood. Christian spirituality was not a children's story. It wasn't cute or neat. It was mystical and odd and clean, and it was reaching into dirty. There was wonder in it and enchantment.

Perhaps, I thought, Christian spirituality really was the difference between illusion and magic.