

INVOCATION

When the deacons at our Bible Belt church cued up a horror flick aimed at dramatizing Hell according to the apocalyptic book of *Revelation*, I figured I'd better get right with God, and soon.

Somebody killed the lights, plunging the sanctuary into darkness. The reel-to-reel tapes commenced spinning; then came the rattle of the projector and the flicker of light and suddenly you could smell the sulfur oozing throughout the room, see the sparks raining down, feel the temperature rise when the Devil tossed another log on the blaze.

This was the Atlanta suburbs. This was 1975: the heyday of horror, the decade of *The Exorcist*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and *Carrie*. Saddled with a shoestring budget, the filmmakers had

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resorted to pilfering every eerie cast of light and blood-curdling soundtrack for a sacred purpose. It was October, the bewitching season, and the weather had begun to turn, a chill wind rustling the leaves on the trees. But the temperature inside our church seemed suddenly to spike, as though someone had helped ol' Lucifer stoke the furnace.

I was seven years old, a small boy with a big head, prone to cowlicks, chapped lips, and bruises of undetermined origin. My pockets bulged and sagged with all the luggage of boyhood—bubblegum, baseball cards, and rocks. Which is to say I had very little inkling I was a putrid sinner in desperate need of redemption and could die at any moment and spend forever roasting on a spit in Hades.

I vividly recall only one scene from the film: a man lying on his back, cinched in torment, crying out for water and for anyone within earshot to loose him from his suffering. All around him, other lost souls languished in various poses of misery. There was much moaning, mourning, and of course gnashing of teeth. The camera zoomed in on the man, lingering on a solitary tear rolling down his cheek. My own face went flush. My ears burned. Fidgeting in my pew, I wanted to help the man—to reach across that impassable gap from my world to his and offer a sliver of ice to soothe his parched tongue. But as the Voice of Doom narrator was quick to remind us viewers, it was too late. *This misery will endure forever*, the Voice explained. The victim had already sealed his fate. He'd made an irrevocable choice.

In order to convey the timelessness of eternity, the Voice asked us to draw upon our imaginations. "Picture a mosquito flying around the earth," he commanded, his tone guttural with Old Testament-style authority. "Picture him, that common pest, circling the globe, over and over. See him flap his wings and chip away at the dust till he whittles the crust to its very core—to a ball tiny enough to hold in the palm of your hand. Consider

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how many millions of years of human history such a task would take to complete.” Then, after a pause long enough to allow us to ponder a timespan so incomprehensible, the hammer: “That, dear sinner, is one second in eternity.”

Well.

After the service, we headed to the Long John Silver’s. As we waited out the line in the drive-through, a preacher shouted through the static on the AM radio in Dad’s Chevy Malibu. Then, on the ride home, the car reeking with the smell of deep-fried fish, I asked my parents how I could go about avoiding spending the rest of forever in such a dismal place as I’d glimpsed tonight.

“Gotta get Saved,” they told me.

“Saved from what?” I asked.

“Why, eternal hellfire.”

They each had their redemption stories. Children of the Great Depression, my parents knew tribulation. After a hard-scrabble upbringing in the hills of north Georgia where his mama’s chatter about Jesus must have seemed less pertinent than the next ear of corn waiting to be shucked, Dad met manhood by huddling in frozen foxholes in Korea, listening for enemy movement and ducking gunfire. He survived his tour of duty and returned home, where he settled in Atlanta, took a wife, and finally heeded his mama’s longstanding advice to fear the Lord. One night, at the behest of a group of churchgoers conducting what they called *visitation* in local homes, he dropped to his knees in his own living room and recited 1 Corinthians 2:9 before rising to his feet, Born Again. With those words, he became a devout believer whose first act as a Christian was to give up cigarettes—cold turkey—when a deacon’s wife took offense at the smell. Nicotine had not passed his lips since. And effective immediately, he meant to apply his new life philosophy. On his postal route, where he worked ten-hour days with a

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burlap sack of junk mail slung over his shoulder, he soon came upon a boy shoeless in wintertime. Inspired by his newfound faith, he bought a pair of sneakers and promptly delivered them to the boy and his family along with their regular mail.

Mom had her own catalog of woes. She had endured a nightmare childhood with an alcoholic father who drank paint thinner when he couldn't get a fix of the real stuff. She never invited friends to her shotgun house in the Cabbagetown neighborhood on Atlanta's east side for fear her father would burst through the front door loaded with bad liquor and worse intentions and contaminate the whole house with his rage. Which probably explains why she claimed the highlight of her academic career had been her election to the Safety Patrol—a post that circumstance forced her to vacate when her mother stepped into a hole in the yard and snapped her shinbone, requiring her to quit school to take care of her baby sister, Elaine. Mom might have graduated early, but she had failed algebra; so she returned to the school next fall and finally turned her tassel a year later than her classmates. By age twenty-two she had overcome poverty, neglect, and abuse in one fell swoop by marrying a teetotaler with a respectable job, officially diagnosing herself as Nervous, and finding a measure of peace in the arms of a more loving Heavenly Father.

So they knew their way to the cross, my parents, and the words to seal the deal. It was a matter of faith, they explained to me. No deeds could complete the transaction. Only accepting God's grace could wipe away the fundamental sinfulness that was every man's burden as a result of simply being born human.

That night in the car, they told me about what they called the Age of Accountability. "When a boy gets a certain number of years," they explained, "he knows the difference between right and wrong. It's clear as day—it's like black and white. Once he knows that difference, the boy's got a choice right there. He can

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do the right thing, or he can go the other way and do wrong. It's up to him, you see."

I was absorbing all this critical information from the back seat of the Malibu. Dad kept checking the rearview mirror to see whether their words were sinking in. Mom turned sideways and strained against her seat belt to connect with me face to face and emphasize the gravity of the moment.

"Once the boy's old enough to make that choice, then he's accountable. He's responsible, you understand. All the choices he makes, they're on him. He can't say he didn't know. And he can't make no bigger decision than between Heaven and Hell."

I asked if I was that age yet.

"There's not a definite age," they told me. "Nothing in God's Word about a cut-off point. It's different for different people. Some folks understand pretty quick-like, but others—well, they take a while. We reckon you've figured it out."

This much was clear: If I was old enough to be accountable, then I could die right now and start suffering for the choice I made. I thought about that mosquito flapping his wings. I thought about holding the earth's core in my hand. I thought about that man in the movie lying prone on his back among the coals hissing and spitting like bacon grease. Clearly I did not want to go anywhere near that forlorn destination. I asked my parents what I needed to do to be Saved.

That night in my dad's car, in that short journey of three miles from the Long John Silver's to our brick ranch on King Arthur Drive, they led me through what they called the Sinner's Prayer. "Jesus," I said, repeating their words, "I'm a sinner. I believe you died on the cross for my sins. I'm ready to accept your grace. I'm ready to be Born Again."

We finished the prayer and said amen. Opening my eyes, I asked my parents what else I needed to do. "That's all there is to it," Mom said. "That's everything," Dad said.

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As I blinked the world into focus, it took on new character. Everything blazed with Glory. That strip of Highway 5, where we passed the Dunkin' Donuts, the K-Mart, the Gas-n-Go, and all the other signs of civilization shining in the grainy dusk of autumn, glows in my memory now as though we were traveling through a celestial city.

Soon I would learn that, according to our church's creed, I could not become an official member without getting baptized, too. But I was only seven, and a bashful boy, and the thought of standing in front of our whole congregation, even with their arms outspread to welcome me, was more than I could pony up to at the time. So I settled for salvation. My parents assured me that, baptism or no, if Jesus were to return tonight, he would claim me as one of his own. "He's written your name in the Book of Life," Mom told me that night at bedtime.

And once your name is etched on those pages, nothing—nothing on earth, nothing above or below—can ever erase it.

FOR THE NEXT SEVERAL YEARS, acting the part of a good Baptist boy took little effort. Contrary to all I'd heard about Adam, Eve, and their legacy of Original Sin, it came natural. I memorized the names of the sixty-six books of the Bible in order. Sang in the children's choir. Participated in what our Sunday school teachers called sword drills, where we raced through the gilded pages of our Good Book—our 'Sword of the Lord'—to locate verses ahead of our competitors. I attended Vacation Bible School. Ate the spaghetti dinners in the Fellowship Hall. Dropped the dollar my parents gave me for the purpose into the offering plate. I paid rapt attention to all the stories of plagues and floods and crumbling walls of Jericho, all the parables of mustard seeds, talents, and prodigal sons. In musty Sunday school classrooms I completed arts and crafts projects: with yarn

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and glue I made a cardboard sign proclaiming *The Lord is nigh unto all who call upon Him*; with clay I molded a book and used a nail to carve *Holy Bible* into it.

On Sunday mornings I joined Dad when he and his fellow deacons convened in the pastor's office, where under a painting of a honey-haired, blue-eyed Jesus wearing his bloody crown of thorns, Pastor Davis led us in prayer, asking God to bless this Sabbath Day for His glory and honor. These deacons were men who during the week wore uniforms with their names stitched across the breast pocket. Men who spent their Sunday mornings using Octagon soap to scrub away all the grime and grease that had accumulated under their fingernails during the week. A dozen men regarded as the disciples for this congregation. They called each other "brother." Even as a boy, seven-, eight-, and nine-years-old, I understood the privilege of standing among them. It was like sneaking behind a backstage curtain—seeing all these men responsible for our church's mission circled up and inviting God to dwell among them.

Inevitably two of them would slide over to allow me to nudge inside, my head grazing their belt buckles, as if they knew I belonged there. It would have been hard for me to imagine, then, a future in which I wouldn't be part of that circle.

A NEARBY BAPTIST CHURCH sponsored a Christian school whose sports teams called themselves the Crusaders. But my parents sent me the public route—not only because they didn't want tuition bills, but more so because we lived in the suburbs. How much of a foothold could the Devil claim in a community of brick ranches nestled among swaths of farmland twenty miles west of Atlanta, sixty miles east of Anniston, and right in the middle of nowhere? Our whole town was saturated in Christianity anyway, so much so that even high school football

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games on Friday nights didn't kick off until a local preacher delivered an invocation—a tradition that continued, by the way, until 1986 when a kid in the marching band refused to bow his head, his father protested a theocratic union of church and state, and together they sued the school district. The boy, as I recall, wore thick, tinted glasses. His sandy hair featured a birthmark, a splotch of white near the crown of his head. Neither he nor I would call us friends, but he had been inside my house when we were younger boys. Once, some of the neighborhood kids joined us for impromptu wrestling matches in the den. The boy, I remember now, had a vicious headlock. Maybe that maneuver foreshadowed the kind of tenacious fight he and his father would put up in the future. His protest stirred up a national story. It drew more attention to our town than anything we'd ever experienced. In an interview with the local newspaper, the boy claimed, "A couple of callers have threatened to burn down our house. Others have threatened to wrap my saxophone around my head." In its legal defense, the school district noted that local clergymen had been praying before games since 1947. This was tradition. This was who we were. Representatives defended the invocations by claiming they "satisfy the genuine, good faith wishes on the part of the majority of the citizens of [the county] to publicly express support for Protestant Christianity." The school district resisted the family doggedly, but finally in 1989, after the boy and I both graduated, the Supreme Court ruled the pre-game prayers unconstitutional.

Nowadays, there's just a moment of silence.

I WAS SO IMMERSSED in this corner of Christendom that, even as my age crept into double digits, my rebellion consisted only of sins modest in scale. I stole a GI Joe doll from the local K-Mart. I puffed cigarettes amidst the skeletons of dead

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cornstalks bordering our subdivision. I adopted a vulgar vocabulary on par with the neighborhood boys'. In short: I stayed the straight and narrow. On Sundays Pastor Davis did a bang-up job of clarifying the difference between right and wrong, and the Christian Walk seemed mostly a matter of doing the one and avoiding the other.

Then a strange thing happened. A thing I knew was coming, all right, but had no idea how to navigate when it arrived. An event that would transform me, as it transforms us all—one that would change my body, mind, and this Baptist boy's understanding of everything he knew about his rightful place in the universe.

I turned thirteen.