

1/30/2015

English 102-010H

Dao

Humming, I passively dipped my rubber coated spoon into my yogurt and wiggled it around. Yogurt was probably my favorite food to play with, and I got away with it, too. I got away with pretty much everything. I smiled as the pink goop splooshed up to the sides of the cup, but didn't quite go over. My little four-year-old fingers didn't quite hold the spoon right, anyway, so if I made a mess I could probably say it was an accident... not that I'd really get in trouble.

"Alicia," my grandmother's voice distracted me from my cup of yogurt, "do you know what it means to accept Jesus into your heart?"

"Umm... I think so?" I stumbled over my words, not wanting to disappoint, "It means that you believe in him."

"Well, Satan believes in Jesus, but Satan is in hell. You have to accept Him into your heart, ask Him to forgive your sins, and promise that you'll follow Him. Otherwise you'll end up in hell, too."

My little eyebrows squeezed together. Satan was still kind of a sticky concept for me, at that age. I was confused at whether sin was my fault or Satan's fault or... somebody else's? And if Satan was tempting us here in the world, then how was he in hell?

"I think I did that, Grandma." I said, a little bit worried.

"Are you sure? Do you know what hell is like, Alicia?" My grandmother's voice was stern, but not unkind. It was her 'danger' voice; the one she used when she was telling me not to touch the stove or to keep my hands out of her sewing drawer. I shook my head, and she answered herself quickly. "Hell is a very bad place. It is dark there, and you're separated from Jesus and your whole family. If you go to hell, you'll never see me or your mom or your dad again. You'll be all alone, and you'll be burning the entire time. I don't want you to go there, so it's very important that you accept Jesus into your heart and ask him to forgive your sins."

I had never been so terrified in my entire life, after those few words. My throat had gone dry, but I didn't want my yogurt anymore. My grandma turned back to the sink, and I got down from the counter and walked into the computer room, which doubled as my playroom. The closet was full of toys and dress up clothes, and I bee-lined directly there. Shuddering, I closed the closet doors behind me and climbed into the basket full of stuffed animals, huddling with them in the dark. Dust particles stirred in the summer sunlight that filtered through the cracks in the doors, and the musty scent of mothballs drifted down from the old coats and blankets above my head. White knuckled, I clasped my hands together and twined my fingers, squeezing my eyes shut.

"Dear God," I whispered out loud, my voice quiet and shaky, "I'm really sorry for my sins. I'm really, really sorry. Please forgive me," I stopped, fading off into silence. I couldn't think of any sins I had done. Could Jesus tell if I didn't know? I had to have done something bad. I bet I'd done a bunch of stuff, and didn't even realize it! I squeezed my hands together even more desperately, bowing my head until my chin hit my chest. "Please, please forgive me for all the sins I did and please come into my heart. I really want you to come into my heart, please." I opened one eye, but nothing happened. I didn't feel any different. How was I supposed to know it had worked? I closed my eyes and tried again. "Dear Jesus, please come into my heart. I promise

I'll always do whatever it is that I should do. I'm sorry for my sins. Please don't let me go to hell. Please don't let me go to hell. Please, please, please. I'm really sorry." I huddled there, alone, nestled in a menagerie of overstuffed animals, wracking my brain for any clue on what else I was supposed to say. I couldn't come up with anything, so I said the whole prayer three more times for good measure, followed by a nearly silent "amen." I sat there, cuddling with my favorite bear for a while. I thought that maybe I would hear Jesus say something or feel some sort of godly pat on my head to tell me I had done the right thing. It didn't come. Eventually, the terror and adrenaline faded, leaving me kind of tired and warm in the dark closet. I buried myself in the mountain of fluff and fell asleep, a tiny girl in a manger of toys.

As I grew, I realized that nothing in the world made my family happier than when I was smart in church. Knowing every verse and every song by heart earned me more praise than nearly anything else- more praise than good grades, more praise than art that I was proud of. I became obsessed with it, picking everything up quickly- every night closing my eyes and whispering to God to forgive me for whatever it was that I had done bad, hoping for an answer that never came. I stopped earning praise for being good at church as I got older, but that didn't stop me from trying- tirelessly and frustratingly. For a short time, I attempted to pose philosophical questions for the attention I was so utterly desperate for, and while most questions were off-limits, some were greeted with enthusiasm. I did my best to put the ill-met questions out of my mind, because I was sure I would understand them when I was older. Why, I would ask, why does God make people go to hell just for not choosing him? How can that choice be worse than any sin? How do we know that the Bible isn't just a book that someone wrote? Why doesn't God talk to humans anymore? Where did all the angels go? I was assured that these questions were just a little too complicated for me right now. I only had to have faith, and wait.

I waited. When I turned twelve, I graduated from Sunday school to our church's youth group for teenagers. The change was welcome. Sunday school had grown intensely boring. I was ready for some challenge. I was ready for my questions to be answered. I was ready to learn all of the lessons that I had been denied on the basis of being "too young," or so I thought. In our church, teenager-dom was the age at which children would "choose" to become baptized, thereby signaling to the congregation that we were adults who had chosen Christ of our own accord, becoming real brothers and sisters in the lord- or some nonsense like that. Of course, the choice was made for us- to become baptized or to face the consequences. It was June, just after school ended. All of the graduating kids, well, all two of us, had a private interview with the pastor, where he asked us for our testimony- our story of salvation. I was embarrassed of mine. Who wanted to admit that they had only accepted Jesus because they were a terrified child, alone in the dark, frightened of flames and loneliness? I mildly altered the story, making it that my grandmother and I had done it together, in her kitchen. I made it much more lovely sounding- even adding in a Bible reading and a feeling of peace coming over me. He really liked my story, and my twinge of guilt at lying was quickly overcome with my pride when we walked out of his office together and he told my parents that he'd never met a child so ready to become baptized.

I remember the day of my baptism as a day that went very fast. All that morning my stomach was twisted in knots of nervousness- and the taste of hope in the back of my mouth. Hope that, after all these years of feeling like I was pretending, I might finally get some sort of signal. A sign that I wasn't doing all of this for nothing. I remember sitting on the pew between my mother and my sister, feeling uncomfortably constricted in my bathing suit underneath my crisply ironed dress and white tights. A large black tee shirt and a towel was in a bag next to my mother's purse, reminding me every time we bent our heads to pray exactly what was coming. Our church was

small, so filling the baptism tub was quite a large endeavor- and it all happened outside. I was one of several people to get baptized that day, but all of the church stayed after to watch us. Getting ready happened too quickly, and before I could breathe, we were walking out- single file, all of us in oversized tee shirts and bathing suits, the women's hair pulled away from our faces, the morning sun bouncing off the clear water in the large, blue basin. We went in order of age with the women first, so I was second, but I was so nervous I didn't even see the girl before me go under. The preacher's baritone voice carried over the grass, but I couldn't pick out the individual words. I watched her come up and her mom swaddled her in a towel to the sound of clapping, and I saw her shivering. I immediately steeled myself not to shiver or flinch- I wouldn't embarrass myself while the whole church was watching. Then I was walking, up the steps, focusing intently on not slipping on the wet stairs or stumbling in the strangely deep tub. The pastor held my hand as I stepped down into the icy water, and his other hand appeared on my back and firmly turned me into the correct position. His hands were very wide and blocky- they reminded me of my dad's hands. My glasses had been left behind with my mother, so all I saw looking out was the sun, and the grass, and the colors of the people in their summery church clothes. The pastor's face, standing right next to me outside of the water, was the only thing I could see with any clarity, so I ignored the colorful mess of onlookers and stared directly at him- determined not to make a mistake.

"Now, little sister," he began, "do you believe that Jesus Christ, son of the Lord our God, was sent from Heaven to die for your sins, and to rise again three days later?"

This was a no-brainer, but I couldn't help the nagging voice in the back of my head, muttering, do you? Do you really? Are you sure?

I choked out a quiet, "Yes," and he continued.

"And do you promise to follow him in all that you do, and walk a path of righteousness, for his name's sake?"

This one was easier. "Yes," I said, at the same volume, but less shaky.

"Then by the grace of Jesus Christ," he said, his voice deep and rumbling- like I'd always thought God's voice would sound, but quieter, "I baptize you in his likeness, buried-"

And his words were cut off, and I went under the water, just for a moment. It felt infinite, that moment. All I felt was silence and floating, the rumble of the voice of God distant and soothing. I thought, maybe- just maybe- this was my sign. This secret moment under the water, blessedly gone from the eyes of the church, dark and safe- but then I was pulled up, through the surface of the water, and light and sound assaulted me again. Applause from the crowd and unintelligible words from the pastor finished my ceremony as my dad's strong, familiar hands wrapped me in a warm beach towel and handed me my glasses, helping me down the wet steps.

I had wanted so badly to feel some revelation. Something. Anything. I wanted my sign, but I didn't get it. Not then, anyway. Like the beat of a funeral dirge, time passed. I got older, and more jaded. I began to think that there was something wrong with me. Where were the answers I had been promised in my extreme naivety and youth? Here I was, as old as I had ever been, and with not a single new point of biblical or spiritual knowledge since my Sunday school days- and a thousand more questions. I had never dated, and this disquieting element of my life only got more obvious with every birthday. "Sweet sixteen and never been kissed!" my mom would say, smiling. She didn't say anything about it when I turned seventeen though, or when I graduated from high school, or when I turned eighteen. My friends were having children, getting married-

and I was starting to suspect things about myself that didn't coincide with what I knew of God. I did finally receive my final, terrible spiritual awakening in the most mundane place, at the most mundane time- a summer Sunday morning, at church, only a month after graduation. The church of my childhood had long since disbanded, my pastor's flock left to scatter to the four winds, and we sat in a much larger auditorium, with a preacher who had a bass guitar player and two big projection screens beside the giant wooden cross. I had read the bible a few years ago, with no luck on the spiritual front. The word of God was just words to me. I knew every lesson and every clichéd line of prayer. I could do it in my sleep. I was allowing myself to doodle on my pamphlet when this microphone-d pastor finally said something that caught my interest.

“Now, I've been doing spiritual counseling for a long time, guys,” he said, his voice echoing in the packed chamber, nothing like the voice of God from my childhood, “and if there is one thing I know, it's that faith is more important than answers. God isn't going to give you all the answers- and when people come to me with questions? Well, I just have to tell them that they have to have faith. If they can't do it, they fall from the path of God. Simple as that.”

He went on to blather more about faith and the importance of trusting God, but I had utterly stopped listening. This was it. This was my sign. It struck me like a bullet that I was never going to get the answers I had been waiting my whole life for. Those answers *didn't exist*. I felt like I had been slapped across the face. I felt like I had been punched in the gut. I felt like every stupid, overused cliché in the history of language that didn't come from the tower of-damn-babel. I was *mad*. Here I was, my childhood gone, all that effort, *wasted* on searching for something I would never, ever receive: Understanding. Worst of all? I was the only one in the entire building who knew it. God was dead, he was dead all along, and I just realized that I had been pining over a message from a ghost that would never come.

Through church I held in my fury, smiled and lied like I'd been well taught to do, and quietly spewed every angry, venomous thought into my journal when I was finally alone, feeling twisted with rage inside that I couldn't do more. I wanted to scream. I wanted to fight someone. Instead, all that I got as my anger slowly dripped out of me was an overwhelming sense of hopelessness.

What was I supposed to do now?

A ballet of sparkling drops of sun dance over the surface of the river, reaching up to gently brush the shivers of falling sap on the leaves above my head. Rocks and sand twine in between my toes, rough and soft and delicate, like ice chips in the melting sun- unnerved at being disturbed from their places. I lean back against the bank, squinting as I look directly up, through the jittering willow leaves, at the broken mirror of the sky, reflecting itself all over the rocky shore. It's June. I'm alone out here, getting my shorts dirty, smiling at the lichen covered branches of some old tree, now serving her part as a little shelter for beasts and bugs and me.

It was a slow time, those years after I stopped believing. There was a lot of pain. But there was a lot of pain out here, too- it just wasn't mine. I watched a wide-winged heron circle through the ceiling of quivering leaves and dappled sunlight, knowing that his pain was so much more pure than mine. This was my church now- and my sacrament was the bread of the earth, and the wine was my own blood, pumped through my heart, into my mind. It reminded me that some things are temporary, like the stories of people. Some things don't die, though, like the purity of the pain of a heron. I closed my eyes and felt quiet, warm and alone- yet, wholly content. Like an unending instant underwater, the silence of the world around me grew until it filled my ears and nose and breath. Yes, I was entirely alone, but I was alright with that.