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For Richard Dawkins

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For Richard Dawkins

I don't like used bookstores. I don't like the musty smell of old, cheesy, romantic mystery novels gathering dust in some tucked away, extremely impractically placed, floor to ceiling shelf. I don't like the disorganized aesthetic, with books seemingly alphabetized by someone who—mostly—knew the order of the alphabet, or the 'employee picks' which look like they were curated by an organic coffee shop fiend who also happens to love Portland and knows all the coolest spots to do photo shoots in San Francisco. I don't even like most of the books, with their bold printed short and grabby titles, like badly written three word Netflix descriptions, begging for you to take them off the shelf and uncover someone's (unfortunately) successful attempt at self-publishing.

And yet, there I found myself, waltzing into what I really hoped was the back entrance of a very small, disorganized, smelly, quieter-than-my-middle-school-library used bookstore. I had been crawling the shelves everywhere in the bay for almost a week, desperately searching for a select few titles. After about ten minutes of hopeless defeat, I began to wander the bookstore blindly, like an Israelite in the desert, hoping by some act of coincidence or fate I would come across a title that stuck out to me; and much to my surprise, that's exactly what had happened.

...

My parents used to send me to these God-awful (no pun intended) Christianity camps over the summers. These were not entry level, 'lets memorize all the books of the bible with a catchy song' Christian camps. These were challenging, very serious, intense days full of pure protestant indoctrination. Anyone sent to these camps was either far too excited to be there, or forced to be there as a last ditch attempt to save your Sunday school skipping, pot smoking, 'sexually active' teenager from the clutches of satan himself. And generally, I identified with the latter. But junior year was different.

After having watched my mother endure surgeries and endless tests for her constant pain, my uncle and grandfather both become diagnosed with late stage cancer—and my godfather suddenly fall dead in his 30's—I was desperate. I wanted god to be real. I wanted to be able to fall to my knees, throw myself prostrate at the feet of jesus and cry out for him to tell me this was all okay. I was destroyed, lying awake at night with tear stained cheeks, trying with every fiber of my being to connect with any sort of higher power for answers. Camp this year no longer meant days shackled up with a bunch of squares listening to the same four pastors peak, it was a time to be alone, center myself, and really search for something with all my heart. And so I welcomed the camp with open arms

How naïve.

The camps themselves consisted of daily lectures from a ‘diverse’ group of ONLY old, white, male, republican Christians, who somehow finagled enough money out of churchgoers pockets to support their career indoctrinating teenagers instead of getting a real job. The first day lecture is the one I remember best because it never changed: we would say a disgustingly campy repeat-back chant, join clammy hands in prayer, and then the lights would suddenly dim. A hush would fall over the room as a low, devious classical music ensemble would creep in. Intense clips of war, terror, and violence would play across the screen. Then, from the right hand of Satan himself, a well spoken, very British voice would echo into the auditorium:

Richard Dawkins.

I wish I were joking or exaggerating. In hindsight it seems crazy and laughable. But put a bunch of 14-year-old virgins and high schoolers who have never missed one Sunday of church in those seats, and you have a room full of converts. The simple association of 9/11 scenes and famous atheist Richard Dawkins—while completely illogical and manipulative—was far too strong for the weak and battered minds there, most of which were already tired of fighting. They played into that fear I had arrived with: the fear of death and harm, not just for myself but my loved ones. Atheism meant destruction, evil, sickness, and terror. It was all a part of a clearly stupid, and endlessly flawed argument, but one that was battered into my mind nonetheless:

Godlessness meant chaos.

—and Richard Dawkins was the devil. So was Obama. Or something like that.

But in spite of my every effort, I never did find god there. Or anywhere.

...

And now, years later, with nearly the same amount of desperation, I wandered through the endless bookshelves until I turned and saw it. Across the thin walkway, on a shelf of its own as though it knew I was coming, perched on a delicate metal stand, angled into the bright light, silver reflective cover and orange accents calling out, the pages seemingly exuding status and importance: *The God Delusion*, By Richard Dawkins. It might as well have a foreword by Lucifer himself. I stared on in fearful awe; slowly, like I reached out for God all those summers ago. I reached out and snatched the book from its lofty vantage point. Somewhere, hundreds of miles away, my parents felt a disturbance in the force.

I walked out of that bookstore with newfound confidence. I felt as though I had finally cleared my head of those last few cobwebs of radicalization that had been force fed to me all those years ago. I still haven't finished the book, but I keep it on my desk almost as a totem. To simultaneously remind myself where I was and how far I have come. I still get a little tingle when I lift the book to read, and still throw it in my closet like a scared child when my parents visit. Some things never change. Though I'm glad that I have.