

Spencer goes to church

By

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The AT-AT pushed farther into Rebel territory raining down lasery death and stormtroopers followed on the ground. The Rebels had one command post left and the Imperial death machine was moving in as fast as its mecha-legs could carry it. Rebel soldiers were getting wiped out by the incoming forces. Soon the Imperials flooded the last command post, backed up by their faithful chickenwalkers. Then the Rebel resistance on Hoth was stomped out and the battle was over.

DEFEAT in red letters on the screen.

Spencer dropped his controller on the carpet.

Carson needed to use lame tactics to win. And he had done it three games in a row.

Spencer knew that he was better than Carson at battlefield. He would always win a fair fight.

‘Do you really need to use the AT-AT to win?’ he said.

‘Part of the game, man,’ Carson said, ‘it’s supposed to be used.’

‘You’re lame, dude.’

‘Three in a row.’

‘Yeah, cause you fuckin cheated.’

~

‘Pancakes boys!’

And the sudden smell of pancakes drifting from the kitchen—swelling into Spencer’s nose and his eyes almost turned into pancakes like some kind of cartoon character and the aroma pulled him to his feet and then he was walking toward the kitchen through the invisible ribbon of pancake. Carson sprung up and ran into the kitchen and was already sitting down at the table when Spencer got in.

There was a stack of pancakes and a plate with strips of bacon that looked like burnt tree bark and then two glasses of orange juice.

Carson seized a handful of bacon and chowed down. Spencer picked up a strip and he could see the carcinogens seared into the meat. He delicately bit into it and it crumbled in his mouth like a coarse salty ash and he swallowed it begrudgingly. Who would do such a thing to bacon?

He reached for the juice and drank till the taste of the bacon was gone and he cursed people who cook crispy bacon. Such a waste of a pig.

They hadn’t exchanged words since the dispute. Only Spencer buttering his pancakes and the goey fart noises of the syrup bottle.

‘Alright you two,’ Carson’s mom said. ‘We leave for church in thirty minutes. That means you have to be dressed and ready go at ten.’

Spencer was reminded of his hour of reckoning. The hour he had been dreading the entire weekend. An hour in that place which going to church hopes to avoid.

It was too late for him to fake being sick. There was no way to weasel out. He was sentenced to one hour in church.

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Have fun at church honey.

Say hi to Jesus for me.

I ironed your shirt ;)

Love you, Mom.

The little yellow note flittered out of his green buttonup and he said real funny mom after he finished reading it out loud. You knew I would hate this.

He put on the shirt and buttoned it and then inspected himself in the mirror.

‘Why would god care what people wear to church?’ he asked his reflection, but it never responded because there was no answer.

Oh that guy's wearing Ralph Lauren, he must really love worshipping god.

~

Spencer squeezed into the backseat between Carson's brother and sister. Carson's dad started the car and country started playing on the stereo. Spencer thought his life couldn't get any worse and he sat through the entire ride of Kenny Chesney songs in silence feeling like he had to shit his pants.

They pulled into the parking lot of *St. John's First Memorial Presbyterian House of our*

Lord and Savior Jesus Christ of Nazareth and there was a mob of well dressed biblethumpers all in their Sunday's best with the guys in nice shirts or a suit and tie and the girls wearing dresses. The place looked more like somewhere you'd go to buy car insurance than a place of worship. Buying car insurance is probably more fun.

Spencer was out of the car and it was nice out and kids were running around and the fresh sound of their screams in the air. He started walking towards the church and then saw his shoe was untied so he bent over to tie it and when he looked up Carson's family was gone and he was then just a confused and lonely heathen in the parking lot. Frantically he looked for them and he caught sight of Carson who was talking to a girl in a simple white dress and she was cute.

Naturally he went over to try and cockblock Carson. You play battlefront like a bitch you get treated like a bitch.

'Hey Carson,' he said. 'Thought I'd lost you.'

'Sorry,' Carson said and then awkward silence.

Eventually the girl looked at Spencer and smiled and stuck out her hand.

'I'm Kayla, what's your name?'

'Spencer.'

'I haven't seen you here before, Spencer, are you new?'

'I'm not a christian,' he said.

'Oh.'

The silence came back with a vengeance.

The anguish on Carson's face was delicious.

'I have to go meet my family,' Kayla said. 'See you in youth group on tuesday?'

'Yeah,' Carson said, 'see ya.'

She walked away, white dress flaming in the breeze, and then it was just the two of them.

'So is that the girl you were talking about this weekend?' Spencer said, unable to resist a

smirk. 'She's cute.'

'Fuck off,' Carson said. 'Could you be any more retarded?'

'I'm sure I could try.'

Carson's mom called out to them to go inside and they obeyed.

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There was nowhere to buy car insurance. Just rows of pews that led up to an altar with a podium and then a large bronze cross on the back wall. No frescoed ceilings or sculptures of bleeding jesuses or brownrobed monks burning incense and the priest didn't even have cool headwear. He was just an old white dude with huge square glasses that swallowed his face. And then he started to talk and the room went silent and he read a passage from the bible which he could've been making up as he went along and nobody in the room would know otherwise and then he started talking about god and loving god and more god damn god.

His words made sense in that they had definitions, but to Spencer they held no value. Then suddenly a chorus rang out as everyone started repeating the priest's words in a creepy monotone chant and Spencer felt a chilly tingle. He had no clue what they were saying but he flailed his lips randomly and silently hoping that no one would notice and out him as a heretic.

A pipe organ started booming chords and the room wobbled with the harmonization of all the voices, but this time the voices belonged together and actually sounded nice. Spencer looked over at Carson's open hymn book and sang along even though he had no idea how the tune went. Two more songs and then everyone sat down again.

'There was time in my life where I doubted my faith in God,' the priest said. There were muted gasps around the room and then a terrible silence followed.

'I know what y'all're thinkin—don't worry—it's a normal part of life.'

‘It's hard to go on believin when there are obstacles in your way and you think there's no way to get past. For me it was my father's death. Long hard years of working in the coal mines in West Virginia and his lungs didn't work to the point where he could barely get off the couch without wheezing. I prayed every night for'im. Then when he passed on I thought that what was the point in all the prayin if he gone and died anyway. That's when I doubted the lord was truly watching over me.’

‘But here’s what I did. I went to the church and this was a small town in West Virginia mind you so the walk wasn't long and I found Reverend Fairley and I told him what was on my mind and what he said to me set me down the path of life I'm on today. He says Walter I know it's a tough time for you right now losin your daddy and that's shakin you a little bit—but you gotta see the big picture. Big picture I ask him and he just puts his hand on my shoulder and tells me the eternity I'm gonna spend with my daddy in heaven is all that matters and we'll be reunited under the Lord provided I give everything to the Lord. And that's what I did and through that tribulation I strengthened my bond with the Lord. Through these moments of sadness and unfairness we can become stronger and bring our faith to the highest level.’

A woman ran out of the room with her hands cupped over her face and she was crying. Spencer looked over at Carson’s family and they were talking about how inspiring a message that was.

The service continued, but Spencer obsessed over the story that the preacher had told and scrambled to find any logic behind it. How was his faith strengthened by failure? The only result of the prayer was nothing and yet the preacher took that as proof that there was something greater behind the nothingness. And devoting himself—his life—to that nothingness with unconditional love and submission. Was it bravery or ignorance?

‘Psst.’

Spencer was yanked out of his internal debate. Carson signaled for him to stand up and so

he stood up and realized everyone else was standing up and filtering into the aisle and forming a line towards the priest kneeling down in front of the altar with a chalice of wine. In any other circumstance, that many people lined up to drink wine would be indecent. He waited for his turn to take a swig of the Trader Joes blood of christ and it was gross and he coughed right in the face of the priest who glared at him with unholiness and he thought well what did you expect giving wine to thirteen year olds? and then scurried back to his seat and looked around.

Why were there so many people there eager to sing and honor this god they'd never seen and never would see?

The question looped over and over and over and the service was still going on somehow like he was stuck in a hyperbolic time chamber and there was more singing and praising of the lord and his jewish son.

Spencer had his head buried in his hands and his eyes locked on the back of the pew in front of him where there were bibles and he stared hard at them and then it felt so obvious. He had never actually read the bible. Maybe there was something magical inside of it that enabled you to connect with the truth of the universe. It was just a book. Yet how many people have been killed in the name of god and christianity?

Then the service finally ended and Spencer was no closer to spiritual enlightenment—only a massive boredom. Carson's family got up to leave and Spencer started to follow but then he looked again at the bibles lining the pew and he kneeled down and pretended to tie his shoe. Then he untucked his shirt, grabbed a bible, and shoved it halfway into his pants. There was a slight bulge, but he could make it work.

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Spencer sat in bed running his thumb over the words *The Holy Bible* embossed in gold on the brown cover of the book. There was something imposing about the book. It held the power to

make people believe without any evidence. And it just lay there silent on his lap like it was judging his every move.

Is stealing a bible a true sin? He didn't know much of the bible but he knew that theft was a sin. But if he had taken the bible attempting to learn more about this proposed god then it might not be a problem at all. That if it was for understanding then no sin would have been committed. Then a knock at his door and he stashed the bible under his sheets like it was a porn magazine.

Mom came in and told him that she would be out all day tomorrow so he would have to walk to and from school. Then she left and he pulled the book out again but instead of opening it he just stared at the cover, afraid, and went to sleep without reading a single word.

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On the way back from school Spencer stopped by the wash next to his neighborhood and threw rocks and sticks and drew pictures in the sand. He sat under a tree to escape the assault of the sun and he went into his backpack to pull out the other half of his turkey sandwich and there was the forgotten bible staring him in the face. He opened it and started reading.

He read about the one-week creation of the heavens and earth and light and all of the living creatures and man who was created in the image of god. He read about the garden of Eden and Adam and Eve and the creation of sin. What is so wrong with knowledge that god didn't want man to have it? Life without knowledge is meaningless. Breathing and eating and shitting but not thinking isn't living.

He had stolen the bible in the pursuit of knowledge. He had sinned twice, like Eve stealing from the tree. He looked up at the sky and there were no clouds but he couldn't see god. No bolt of lightning coming to strike him for sinning. No lightning bolts ever came from the sky to smite murderers or rapists, so they definitely wouldn't go after a boy just wanting to see what the bible

was all about.

‘What’s it gonna be, god? Huh? You gonna cut me down for sinning?’

Nothing

He was just yelling at the sky.