

A Serious Chapter

Chapter 11 - God and Sex

Tonight, I'm sitting on the floor between Jessica's long legs so she can brush my hair 'one hundred times.' My hair is longer than I was allowed back home. Their mollycoddling reminds me of chimpanzees picking out lice, sweet but strange. I'm also wary of what happened on this bed when they tickled me. Rachel lifts my foot, telling me she's giving me a foot massage 'to be useful.' When I object, she asks if it isn't pleasurable. I admit it is. I stretch my tolerance to allow myself to enjoy this pampering. In my mind lurks the warning that something is wrong with letting them do this, but I can't figure out what.

Soothing new-age music and pleasant sensations head and foot set my mind adrift. The girls tell me I'm "dangerously pretty." I laugh it off because the compliment scares me. I cringe when I think about their campaign to get me to shave my pubic hair. They argued, "Your grandmother had hairy armpits, your mother only a hairy pussy. In our generation, both are kept hairless. Just do it." Maybe my parents were right to keep me covered in baggy clothes. Sexuality has put my faith in jeopardy. My virgin medal is in my drawer. I'm unmoored in a storm of temptation.

To escape worrisome thoughts and ease my discomfort at seeing myself as their Barbie doll, I tell them what's been troubling me. "Defending Christianity from you guys makes me think about religion more than I did at home. You're the first people I've known who didn't think like everyone in my church."

"Thinking? Isn't that forbidden in your church?" teases Jessica with her usual sarcasm.

There's more I want to tell them. "My parents can't tolerate my not agreeing with them, as a good Christian girl should. They don't know that it was our minister who damaged my faith. When I told him Jesus as God couldn't be a role model for us, that Jesus had to be a human who overcomes temptations just like ours, he threw me out of his office. I imagined him chasing me out of the church yelling, 'Blasphemer, blasphemer.' I'll never forget his final words. 'Some believe, and some don't. We will pray for you.'"

"Wicked sinful woman! Who do you think you are to think!" mocks Jessica.

Rachel goes into the bathroom for nail polish, so I raise my voice to be heard. "Walking into his office, I thought I would get brownie points. 'What an insightful good girl you are.' Instead, he saw me as a teenager struggling with sexual fantasies."

Jessica pokes my ribs. "He got that right!"

Rachel, ready to paint my toenails, slides her hand up my leg. "Do you mean sexual fantasies like this?"

At her touch, my knees shoot up and clamp together. Rather than recoiling in rejection, it was a jolt of pleasure. Rachel lifts her hands and holds them up in a gesture of surrender. "Sorry. Bad joke. Continue about your minister."

"Walking away, I was furious. He didn't get it, but I never doubted I was right. Jesus, as a man, struggling with his temptations, strengthened my faith more than a Jesus on high, above any mortal challenges. I've decided I can be a Christian without a small-town minister telling me what it means."

Jessica raises her eyebrows exaggerating surprise. "Is that legal?"

I ignore her. "I trusted my own judgment without anyone's approval, in fact, with disapproval. I kept looking for God to punish me. Strike me dead. Nothing happened. Instead, I feel exhilarated to be thinking for myself."

Rachel takes my hands in hers. "Questioning everything you believe takes courage. No wonder you needed a time out."

This is my turn to give them trouble. "It's all your fault. You dress me like a slut. You taught me to masturbate...and to like it!"

Jessica gets it's me teasing them for a change. "Good! Right? You're welcome!"

I get serious again. "Not good. You trapped me between my sexuality and my Christian morality that condemns it. I had a nervous breakdown thanks to you two."

I thought I was joking--until tears fill my eyes. Rachel pulls my feet to her chest and squeezes her hands over them in a tender hug. Jessica stops brushing and wraps her arms around me from behind. I remember how I used to hate them touching me. Now I need their hugs. Maybe I'm starving for what I never got at home.

In the safety of their embrace, a ceaseless stream of sobs, deep and desolate, drains me of ghostly torments amassed for longer than I know. When my sniffles stifle my breathing, Rachel releases me to get tissues. She holds one to my nose, but I take it from her. I'm not their child. To bring us back to normality, I belligerently say what's on my mind. "A horny Jesus, struggling to be good, is my lifeline to Christianity. It makes him a real person, like me...even if my church is too stupid to get it!"

That irks Jessica. "The conflict between religion and sex is made up by men to control women."

Rachel drops the nail polish brush. Picking it up quickly to save the carpet, her fingers are spotted flesh pink. “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”

Her outburst spurs mine. “Yeah, fuck! You’ve made me a wicked woman, but I want to be a good person. Jessica was right. I don’t know who I am anymore!”

That pushes Jessica’s religious-rant button. “Christianity fabricates a mythical world outside of reality. God used to be in the clouds until we got airplanes. Now he’s a voice in your head, but how do you know it’s God’s voice? Maybe it’s the devil, or your dad, or maybe you’re schizophrenic.”

I push back. “Questioning my religion terrifies me. I was born into that world, and it’s all I’ve known. Christianity is the reality I live in!”

Jessica looks at me like I’m crazy. “What does that mean?”

“God’s watching over me. That makes me not alone in the world. God loves me even when I don’t love myself. He makes me want to be worthy of His Love.”

Rachel, holding my foot, speaks softly. “I see why you don’t want to give it up.”

Her unexpected acceptance encourages me to say more. “I was brought up to believe that there’s a Heaven and a Hell, as real as the earth. If I have faith in Jesus, I’ll be rewarded with everlasting happiness in Heaven with God. That’s how the world really is, and outside God’s World, I would be lost and helpless. That scares me.”

Jessica is offended. “Talk about ‘out-of-reality.’ Give me a shred of evidence that this fictional world of yours, heaven, hell, everlasting happiness, and a peeping-tom god, exists! How can God be all knowing, all loving, and all powerful and let bad things happen to innocent people? Duh, your God is a monster or a logical impossibility.”

I’m staggered from a body blow to my heart. Jessica would take away the world as I know it, leaving me lost, vacant inside, alone. “You can’t be right Jessica! Life would have no meaning, no direction, nothing would matter.”

Rachel raises both her hands. “Wait. Wait. Eva, your God-world has been the only home you’ve known, but it isn’t that or nothing. Mind-vacuums don’t happen. To function a mind needs a map of reality—like a computer needs an operating system. If we get rid of our concept of reality, another one replaces it. The goal is a mental map that matches reality. If it doesn’t, we can’t get to where we want to go.”

Jessica pauses to pull hair out of the brush. "Our understanding of the world needs to keep evolving to better represent reality. If not, if we keep believing stuff that isn't true, using an old map, we get lost."

"Now you two wait. Attacking my religion is too easy. You're always telling me what you don't believe. I want to know what you do believe. What map of reality do you carry in your head?"

Rachel pauses only a moment before gleefully responding, as if she memorized it, which maybe she did. "Existence itself is the only true god. It's eternal, all powerful, and knows all. We live on a verdant rock orbiting a sun in an immense galaxy among infinite galaxies. The earth is a living organism where everything interacts to keep it alive. Human survival depends on cooperating with that eco-system and each other. Exploitation, the sin at the source of all sins, damages us, our culture, and our planet because it destroys our creative connections. My deeds are small ripples in the sea of time, enhancing or harming life and culture. When I die, worms and fungus return my body to nature. Alive or dead, I'm part of existence."

That was astounding, but not satisfying. "I like 'sea-of-time.' It's poetic, but none of it's inspiring."

Rachel is a sharp counterpuncher. "Maybe, but mine is real. I can point to it. Where's your heaven and hell? Living in a fantasy may feel good, but living outside reality isn't good for you."

I'm offended by Rachel's blanket put-down of my religion. "Your world doesn't care about people. If God isn't real, who says what's right and wrong? Existence doesn't. Nature creates and destroys with no interest in us. Storms, draughts, diseases kill us by the millions!"

Jessica puts down the brush, unwraps her legs from around me, walks to her dresser, picks up a book, comes back, and sits across from me, next to Rachel. She opens a page marked by a post-it. "Listen to this—my favorite story about God and religion.

"The great prophets, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Confucious, Buddha, and Mohammed, stand on a mountain peak pointing to the same horizon. Since each religion has their own path with their prophet standing at the top, they are certain that their path is the one true way. Each condemns the other religions for being on the wrong path."

"Clever metaphor, but are all religions really climbing the same mountain?"

Jessica is still looking at her book. "I think they are. Here's the next paragraph."

"The greater tragedy comes when the disciples reach the mountain top. Rather than going toward the horizon where all the prophets are pointing, they fall to their knees and worship

their prophet as if he were an idol. Failing to see the great prophets pointing to the common core of values known to all religions as 'God's Laws,' religions become superstitious idolatry."

I like the message that religions are going to the same place on different paths, but not the conclusion. "Maybe all the prophets are pointing to God, not a 'common core of values.' And if there are God's Laws, there has to be a God. I thought you were an atheist."

Jessica raises one finger, flips to another page, and keeps reading.

"Ancient peoples noticed that certain behaviors create harmony and prosperity, others, conflict and suffering. Over centuries, by trial and error, cultures discovered that we are governed by a core of ethical values.

"To spread these ethical lessons, in a time when few people could read or reason, religions created epic God parables and rituals that teach what they call "God's Laws."

Worshiping God means living by 'God's Laws'—not kneeling before his poetic image as if it were an idol."

Now I'm the skeptic. "Yes but, if you don't worship God, you won't respect his Laws. I also wonder whether God's Laws are the same in every religion."

Jessica is prepared. "Look it up! All major religions include the Golden Rule, 'Do to others as you would have them do to you.' All world religions preach truthfulness, kindness, fairness, honesty, forgiveness, and love."

Jessica picks up on the doubt in my face. "You've said that 'God's Laws' are as real as physical laws. I agree. Imagine the opposite. If you live with people who lie, are cruel, unfair, cheat and steal, and never forgive, you'd live in hell. Right? That's obvious. Then the reverse is true. Wouldn't you prefer a world where everyone is truthful, kind, and fair? That would be heaven on earth, right? But that doesn't make your God real. It makes ethical values real."

I'm not surrendering. "Without God, why would people be good?"

Jessica, as usual, backs up her certainty. "Behaviors have consequences whether we see them or not. When you lie, you misrepresent reality. You create your own fantasy world that one day will collapse from the weight of reality."

Rachel agrees, of course. "When you're unfair or unkind, you live in fear of payback because your own behavior proves how bad people can be."

Jessica piles on. “Plus, your bad behavior brings out the same in people around you. People who don’t like being abused leave. Those who remain are willing to treat people badly, including you.”

Where did Jessica get all this stuff? “You ought to be a preacher, except no church would have you.”

Jessica isn’t done. “If people in your life act cruelly and unfairly, your life is miserable. Loving people empower you to be all you can be and enjoy life.”

Now they are sermonizing, I’m the critic. “How do you know that the consequences aren’t God punishing or rewarding us?”

Jessica patronizingly corrects me. “Did you know that sin means mistake, literally, ‘missing the mark? We aren’t punished *for* our sins. We are punished *by* our sins, by the undesirable consequences of our mistakes.”

Jessica is glib, but is she right? “If that’s true, why don’t people do the right thing? People know that walking in front of a car is a mistake with bad consequences.”

Jessica leans over me from the edge of Rachel’s bed. “Most people, most of the time, do the right thing. Gossip, news, movies, and TV constantly show us people hurting people. But those are the upsetting exceptions. Mostly, we cooperate to share roads, obey laws, run families, businesses, schools, and government. I don’t remember who said, ‘Even Devils have to treat each other ethically to make Hell work.’”

“You two claim that people do the right thing to get desirable outcomes. What happens if there are costs and no reward? Are values only pragmatic self-interest?”

Jessica looks exasperated. “When you spread salt in the soil, there’s no immediate result, but nothing grows there anymore. Whether immediately visible or not, behaviors have negative or positive consequences. Like you have faith in God, you can have faith that living your values works.”

Enough! I disentangle myself to stand, and I head for the door. “I surrender—for tonight! My head can’t hold both your world and mine. I want a rematch. Gotta go. Good night, my devils.”

“She means devils in a good way,” Rachel tells Jessica.

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Safe under my covers, my mind drifts among contradictions. In my world, God loves and protects me. In theirs, God is a fictional character illustrating how to behave for our own good.

There is no doubt that living in God's world is more satisfying. I don't want them to destroy what I've loved--and leave me alone in a world of impersonal rules. They claim we have a mental map of reality that changes as we learn. Am I learning or losing what I've valued the most?

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I start our Sunday night session ready for more God-talk. I'm not going to hide my doubts. "Last week, you were persuasive enough to upset me, not convince me. If you're right about natural consequences, why is there so much evil? Aren't we smart enough to learn? People don't step in front of cars as often as we cheat and lie."

Jessica's wide eyes show she relishes my question. "It isn't easy to be truthful, kind, fair, honest, and forgiving. It's hard to tell the truth in a way that's also kind and fair. It's an art form that takes practice."

I'm ready to defend religion. "Learn. Where? Schools prepare us for work, governments want us to obey the law, and for business their profits are top priority. Without religion, survival of the fittest would be our only value."

To my surprise, Jessica nods yes. "You're right! Might makes right is the default culture—survival of the fittest. We need religion. Unfortunately, religions preach myths and moralistic prejudices and raise money. They're into superstitiously worshiping a God to beg His Favor. They want God on their side rather than teaching people how to be on God's side."

Rachel is on her bed, leaning against the wall. "Jessica isn't the only Buddhist here if you count the week a friend took me to a Buddhist retreat in upstate New York. Do you know they wait silently after every person speaks to let it sink in before anyone else talks? Creepy but nice. They didn't worship God or pray. They told us about Buddha studying all the religions to find out why God would let people suffer. After trying every religion without finding an answer, Buddha sat under a Bodhi tree and vowed to remain there until he understood why people suffer. His great insight is the first law of life: 'From good comes good. From evil comes evil.' That's why Buddhism is about how to live a good life. I still keep the card they gave me."

Rachel gets up, finds her purse buried on her desk, and digs out a plastic-coated card from her wallet.

"Life is always joy and sorrow. The Way to face both is:

- care for others and ourselves,
- delight in being alive,

- accept what is and make it better.”

Once again, the girls are overwhelming me. I had thought they were religion haters and debaters. Clearly, they are a lot more than irreligious sluts. “Okay. You’ve thought this out more than I have, but your mechanical world isn’t enough to give up God and His religion.”

Rachel looks puzzled. “What’s missing?”

I gather my thoughts to get this right. “You’re saying that God’s Laws are real, but God is not. I want more than abstract principles. I like having a personal God. I can ask Him for comfort when I’m afraid or suffering. If I don’t know what to do, I ask God for His Guidance. God makes me feel protected. When in doubt, I like knowing I can let go to His Will, trusting God to find a way. You can’t have that kind of personal relationship with the rules on your plastic card.”

Jessica is ready again. “Your church would call me an atheist because I don’t kneel in front of an image of a man-god, but, for me, God is real. Plants thrive when they get the right nourishment—rich soil, water, sun. People thrive when we are nurtured with love, honesty, and fairness. It feels so good people call it the presence of God, or God’s Grace, and I believe that experience is the real God. The purpose of religion ought to be teaching how to do good and recreate the experience of God.”

I’m rushing downstream grabbing at branches. “That makes you an atheist who believes God is real?”

A satisfied smile brightens Jessica’s face. “If it’s useful to make a poetic image to represent the experience of doing good, no harm done, as long as we remember that it’s living the values that creates the experience of God, not worshiping the image. That’s the first commandment: Don’t worship false idols.”

Rachel is eager for her turn. “It would be nice to make believe there’s a superman waiting to help me, but ‘Supreme Being’ isn’t a person, not even a noun. ‘Supreme Being’ is a verb. Like Jessica said, it’s an experience, a way of living. Creating love is supreme being.”

“I never thought about Supreme Being as a verb. I love it. I’m getting aha’s like the hic-ups.”

My compliment gets wide smiles, but I’m not okay. “I’m exhausted. Not sure why--except you’re destroying the world as I’ve known it. I’m blowing away like a balloon in the wind.”

Jessica shows no mercy. “When you have blind faith that whatever God tells you is right, regardless of who it hurts, you get people doing evil in the name of religion. Jihads, crusaders, witch burners, and religious zealots all claim ‘God told me do it.’”

Although there's an excitement to this bull session, it isn't fun and games. I'm way outside my comfort zone. I raise my hand to stop. I need to take a breath, many.

Jessica moves to sit on the floor next to me, leaning back against Rachel's bed. "I envy you having a personal God who loves you. I hope you keep it. We all need an inner voice that speaks for doing good whether you call it God, your higher self, or your conscience. The challenge is that a God voice has to follow the Golden Rule, or it isn't a God voice."

My nod of acceptance makes Jessica think I want her to continue. "Since we are born ignorant, our God voice has to evolve to fix our mistakes and do better next time. We have to learn what a good person, like Jesus who loved everyone, should do."

As right as she sounds, it isn't enough. "Slow down! What you two say is impressive, helpful, but too intellectual. When my grandmother died, she was happy that she was going to Heaven to be with my grandfather. She wanted to see her parents, her sisters, and her friends. She earned it by being good her whole life. You don't offer that comfort."

Jessica responds. "Not everyone believes in heaven enough to get comfort from it. My father saw himself as part of the creative life force, not just his family. For him death was falling into an infinite pond, rejoining the earth, becoming one with everything. He knew that on the surface of the pond ripples of his life would flow in all directions, continuing to influence whomever they touch. For him, believing those ripples were positive was heaven enough. That was his comfort in death."

Rachel yells from the bathroom where she's gone to brush her teeth. "That's poetic Jessica, but Heaven wins—far more appealing. I wonder why Christians don't go early. Volunteer to defend their country, care for people with infectious diseases, give up medicine and get to Heaven sooner."

I'm done! Death is an appropriate ending for tonight. A flash flood inundates my mind, washing over saturated ground that can't absorb anymore. I stand up to let them know I'm leaving. "Okay ladies, much to process. Enough for tonight."

Jessica gets up to walk me the six feet to the door. "You mean you want us to stop tearing up what you cherish most?"

"Yes, and no. There's no one else I can talk to about this. You're the worst choice and my only option."

Jessica smirks. "I thought your minister was worse, or maybe your father?"

As I cross the hall and look back, they're standing in their doorway. Rachel gives me a thumbs-up. "Credit to you. Most Christians wouldn't have this conversation. I respect you for it."

"Yeah, right! Most Christians? I bet I'm the only Christian you've ever talked to. What you mean is that religious nuts usually stick to their own kind to avoid defending their crazy religion. Right?"

Jessica takes me seriously. "Yeah, but we're not as certain as we sound. You're making us think. We're figuring it out as we go. I understand myself better arguing with you."

We hug in the middle of the hallway. These girls are dangerous but lovable.

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In my bed, unable to fall asleep, one revelation sets off others. Dad was right to fear secularism, but he was wrong to think the threat was sexual permissiveness. The real danger to religious faith is that secularism requires truth be verified with evidence and reason. That's a tough challenge when all you have is faith in what somebody else taught you.

I had gotten the message: How can 'little me' know better than all the church authorities and my parents? I've been looking at the world through the lens of their Christianity. There are other lenses.

When I let the church tell me what's true and false, good and bad, I'm still the one deciding to let them decide for me. If I make my own choices, I can learn by trial and error. I won't if I blindly follow. I'll make mistakes, but churches can be wrong—even when claiming to be right.

What stays with me from tonight is how easy and empty worshiping in church is compared to living God's Laws. I'm grateful my God Voice got installed early. I might give up my religion, but I'll always believe that God expects the best from me, and, no matter what anyone thinks of me, God loves me and always will. I'd be lost without my God Voice.

My hand over my vulva brings to mind how sex makes me wrestle with why my church condemns it. What's coming clear is what matters is how I treat people, not whether I enjoy sex or not. Doing good is what God really wants. Or, am I rejecting my religion to rationalize my sexual immorality?

Slipping into sleep, I see myself standing at the edge of a cliff, looking down into a great abyss. I'm at the brink of my world and facing a world I'm eager to explore. Will I leap and trust that I can fly? A tail wind of confidence sweeps away my doubts and fears, and as the ground dissolves beneath my feet, I'm surprised and delighted that, yes, I fly.