EVERY BUSH IS BURNING

BRANDON CLEMENTS
For you.

You know who you are.
To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures.

—Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*
I must ask you in advance to forgive me, because I imagine this letter will catch you off guard. I’m about to break a social norm or two here. The thing is, I’ve been sitting here watching you for forty-five minutes. I’ve sat here and watched you drink your french roast from that orange mug while you nibble on your crumb cake and read your book. I’m thinking about how I’ve been a regular at this coffee shop for years, and how you’ve also been a regular as long as I can remember. And I don’t think I have ever spoken a word to you. I have no clue what your name is. To be honest, you’ve always just been another body making the line longer for me, or taking the table I want—the good one right next to the outlet.

Forgive me. I am maddeningly self-centered. But at least I’m starting to realize it. Unfortunately, the main thing I’m consumed with when I’m sitting somewhere like a coffee shop is how I am perceived. Do people think I am cool and smart? How do I look, sitting here—hip and awesome, I hope? And I imagine that we are all doing that same thing, worried about what other people are thinking, and yet assuming that we are the only one.

I can’t wait to catch up and actually get to talk to you in person. I know you, but I don’t know anything about you. I don’t even know your name or where you are from or what your favorite music is, or what kind of things make your heart beat faster. I look forward to learning all those things about you, and to times where we can be human with one another and not just inconveniences.
Those eyes of yours break my heart. The restless uncertainty. The darting back and forth. The despair. More so than anything else, I know that about you. That like so many of us, you are fundamentally dissatisfied and restless. A feeling that I know well—trust me. You put on a decent front, as do most people. But at the core you’re just like everyone else—searching for something you just can’t seem to find. Have you ever thought about that? We live in one of the richest countries in the world. Luxury, comfort, and mindless entertainment to keep you busy your entire life if you want. But so many people are exceedingly bored and miserable. Weary from a thousand trivial little boredoms. We’ve all become experts at diverting our dissatisfaction into entertainment and a thousand other places, but it’s inescapable. We’re like kids at Christmas, unwrapping gift after gift only to find coal inside the box. And then we look around with darting eyes for the next present, somehow believing that it will be different than the last. It’s quite a desperate business.

I need to tell you something. Well, more than something—a story actually. You may not believe me, and that’s okay. All I ask is that you hear me out. I can convince you of nothing. All I can do is tell you what I need to tell you.

I know you have no reason to trust me right now, and I can’t properly explain why I care about you so much. But this I know: we are kindred spirits. The only way to understand is to keep reading.

I hope that maybe, just maybe, the next time I see you those darting eyes of yours will be still.

When this is over and we get to talk, I hope you will be honest with me. That we can at once cut through all the masks, the frivolity, and the endless surface-level bullshit of life. I hope somehow you remember what we shared, so that we can start there.

Nice to meet you, I guess, or talk to you, or whatever. I can be a bit awkward as you will presently see. But what is life without awkwardness? It’s one of the things that make us human.
I’m not sure where to start.

Probably with Chloe.

Chloe.

How can I attempt the blasphemy of putting her on paper?

When Chloe and I were first married, I used to tiptoe into our room after she was asleep and kneel down beside the bed next to her. I would sit there for twenty, thirty minutes and just watch her sleep. I would watch her chest rise and fall, play with her brown hair falling off of the pillow. My favorite times were when her mouth would be cracked open, lying on her back. That’s just funny, to see a person sleeping like that. She was just so adorable, so sweet and innocent, and it made my insides scream I was so enamored with her. I would bend down and kiss her on the cheek over and over, and it would make me feel so calm and at peace. Like nothing else mattered, and everything would be okay because this would never change. No matter what a day brought, I could enjoy the peace of watching my precious new bride sleep, and then crawl into a warm bed beside her.

Oh, Chloe. I would give anything to be able to watch her sleep tonight.

I heard a while back that there are over 17 million Americans that are clinically depressed. 17 million. Can you believe that? Pick any 18 people that you know, and odds are one of them is so bad off that a medical professional diagnoses them with a clinical illness—not counting the lesser throes so many have that are not
“clinical” in nature. Wow. And if that number doesn’t seem terribly high to you at this point, I think that is an even scarier indicator of where we are.

I’ve been thinking a lot about advertising lately. When it is boiled down, I think advertising can be summed up in two very simple steps. One—the advertiser sets out on his task to make you feel unhappy. You do not have this product. Your skin does not look like that. Your kitchen is incomplete because it doesn’t have one of those. In other words, you are unhappy. Something is missing from your life. There is a gaping void in your soul, ravaging from unmet needs. Of course this is just playing on the already present existential malaise that we all feel. The hook can be anything—from a cheeseburger to a self-propelled vacuum cleaner to more toned abs.

And then comes step two—the attempt to convince you that if you just had this or that that I just happen to be selling, you would in fact be very happy. As happy as the person on TV was when they got theirs, if not more. There’s a chance you could even have sexy women in bikinis hugging all over you while you eat that cheeseburger that’s already making you happy, and of course that is just a cherry on top. Exponential happiness.

I heard that the average American sees three thousand advertisements a day. Three thousand. Is that true? At first, I didn’t think so. And then I thought, maybe I’m just numb to so many of them already that I don’t even notice them? Regardless, we won’t argue over that statement, as if we could prove it anyway. You can count if you want. I’d be interested, though it seems an unbearably tedious task.

Let me know if you do, though.

So anyway, we see a lot of ads everyday. Thousands or however many. We are being told, thousands of times a day, “You are unhappy. You are unhappy. You are very, seriously, miserably unhappy.” Whispered in our ears over and over, by commercial after billboard after commercial after billboard. Incessantly. What a troublesome and despairing business. No wonder so many people are depressed.
Our entire economic system is built on unhappiness.

Liars! All of them. As if you didn’t already know from your constant need to return to the shady profiteers, to new and shinier models. Lies. Lies. Lies. You have been lied to. A lot. The self-help books that smile at you with their big white teeth from the shelf at Barnes and Noble? The cheery slogans and hunky dory platitudes? Liars! All the self-help books in the world will not fix you. “Try harder” and “do better” won’t get you anywhere.

Don’t be fooled. The voices that call you to their merchandise tables do not love you. They offer no hope and only want to make a buck off of your emptiness. If I know anything I know that; I believed the lies, too. And then I lied to Chloe.

I know you’re reading this and what you may be thinking. But please hear me out. If it gets too personal, if you don’t like what you are hearing, if you don’t believe me—push through. And trust that I am only telling you what I’m telling you because I love you. Ask yourself, if I were another smiling face that patted you on the back and told you what you wanted to hear, would I really be loving you?

Now I’ve just got to get this thing written before you leave. But the good news is you look like you are settled in for a while. Don’t hurry, friend. Give me some time, okay?
I can be the king of tangents, and you may not necessarily care about them—but I hope that one day we will be good enough friends that you won’t mind listening to my tangents, though. Maybe one day.

So, about me: I’m 29 years old and work at *The State* newspaper as a columnist. You may have read some of my work before.

I have two twin boys, Liam and Isaac, who are 3 year-old tornadoes. They love to breakdance.

I grew up here in the Columbia area, but I went to Clemson for undergrad, and my blood runs orange. (Oh no. I hope you’re not a South Carolina fan, but I guess we can still be friends if you are. I’ll just have to take you to Clemson sometime. You’ll convert.)

I hold the touchdown reception record at Lexington High School (18 my senior year). Yep, I’m that guy…lame enough that I still brag about high school sports even though I’m pushing 30.

I love thousand island dressing and will eat it on anything. Including scrambled eggs and spaghetti.

Okay, one more. This one is going somewhere, I promise. So I used to live in what I call “zombieland,” which is where I think most Americans live. What I mean by that is when you are not really honest with anyone about anything, your relationships are half-ass and about as deep as a summer mud puddle. “How are you?…I’m fine, I’m fine…Boy the weather sure is nice today, isn’t it?…Sure is Bob, sure is…” You know what I mean. I don’t live in zombieland anymore, though. Because at the end of the day, what
good does hiding it all do? Everyone knows we’re all lying anyway. Sometimes when I am talking to someone I just want to shake them—“Enough of your bullshit…tell me how you are really doing.”

Actually, forgive me. I just told you a lie, and that’s not a great way to start off a friendship. What I mean by “I don’t live in zombieland anymore” is that I don’t live there maybe half the time. I am still stuck in those shadows all too often. But I am trying to get free. I am.

I hope you can join me.
I fear that you will not even have read this far, that you will have put the story down and therefore invalidated my existence with your indifference. I’m a writer, after all, and I’m afraid that this won’t be interesting enough, or well-written enough, to merit your time. What can I say, approval is my drug of choice.

It’s my dad’s fault, really.

This scene plays in my mind, over and over. I’m six years old, and my dad is sitting in his recliner drinking a beer and watching TV like he always does. Johnny from down the street had shown me a karate move earlier that day, and I’m standing in front of him.

“Daddy, look! Look what I can do. Johnny taught me.” I raise my hands in the air and do a chop/kick combo that seemed awfully cool at the time. He nods, takes another sip of beer, not looking at me for even a second. I try it a few more times and he stays glued to the TV, oblivious to me.

I don’t remember what he looks like, or really anything about him at all. Just the feeling of being ignored. And the smell of it.

How much of what we do is just a six-year-old boy saying, “Look Daddy, look!” Anyone, anybody—look, notice me, pay attention, applaud, pat me on the back and tell me I’m worth something.

Maybe you know what I mean. I bet you do. Maybe someday you’ll tell me about it.
Later that night, the night of my karate show, something happened.
But I need a refill. The Sumatra is especially good today.

(You know what? We appreciate you reading this far. Here are ten more chapters as your reward...
Okay, I’m back. And you’re still there, typing away on your computer now. Maybe you’re writing a letter to me? That would be fun.

I hope you’re not writing about how lonely you are. I was feeling kind of lonely earlier today. It’s been one of those days full of thoughts and regrets, and I’m trying to grab them and process accordingly. But, it’s a little overwhelming. I’m sure you can relate.

You know what would be awful? If all of us sitting here in this coffee shop three feet from each other were blazing away at our keyboards or journals, writing about how lonely we all feel. I’ve thought about that before. Wouldn’t that be tragic?

So that night, my father left.

I’m lying there in my bed, tiny hands pressed so tight against each ear that I think I might crush my skull. I wish my hands were thicker, soundproof, impenetrable against the shrieking. I clutch Peter the panda against my chest with my elbow. I try not to hear. Desperately. Pillows. My closet. Humming. Nothing could drown out the fighting.

Useless hands.

They fight for a while, and I hear the door slam. Sara is screaming, so I tiptoe to her room and find Mom picking her up and rocking her back to sleep. Mom’s eyes are tired and watery. I ask her where Daddy is and she says he’s gone. I ask her when he is coming back, and she says never.

Never.

I had no idea what that meant.
I ask her if he left because of me. I had dropped the coffee pot that morning and it shattered all over the kitchen floor. My terrified gasp proved to not be uncalled for—he yelled and screamed and was pissed the rest of the day.

Mom looks me in the eye. “No, no, no, honey, not at all! Don’t you dare think that, bud. Your dad left because, because of —” she stops herself, realizing that I probably won’t understand. “Your dad loves you and I’m sure he’ll be back to see you from time to time. Come here and sit with Mommy, sweetheart,” she says. I climb up into her lap and put my head on her chest, right beside Sara’s. I distinctly remember the sweet, innocent smell of her hair that night.

The next thing I remember, Mom’s wiping tears from my face. She rocks and caresses my face, whispering over and over, “Shhh…shhh. Everything is gonna be okay.”

I put forth a heroic effort to pull it together; blubbering is not exactly the best way to start your career as man of the house.

For a moment that night, I closed my eyes as tightly as possible and held the pose for a few seconds, almost pushing my eyeballs back into my brain. Then I opened them wide and looked toward the door, hoping like fire to see Daddy standing there in the doorway, coming to tell Mom to stop crying, because he was there and everything was okay. But the blurriness faded to an empty doorway. A little bit later I did it again. And again. And again.

He never came.

When I finally gave up, Mom was beginning to calm down and breathe deeply. She rocked still, her eyes shut and head tilted back. Sara sighed, and I looked over at her, bent down and kissed her on her forehead. Don’t worry, baby sister, I thought. I’ll take care of you.

What a miserable broken promise that turned out to be.
That was the last time my dad would grace our family with his presence, as you probably figured out. Another single mom, left to work herself to death because of a selfish and irresponsible man. You know the drill.

I’ll shut up about that now. I’m dealing with it, I promise. And I know even people who had good dads have those same thoughts. We are all broken one way or another.

If you don’t think you are, I will let life wake you up in good time. It tends to do that.

So, back to Chloe. There we were, a couple of months ago. The kids running around in the yard, Chloe double-checking the suitcases. I ran after the kids, catching Liam under my right arm and then going for Isaac in my left. “Come on, you little munchkins,” I said, running with both of them tucked under each arm, sideways like tiny airplanes. We went straight to the car, where I put them both down and helped them in, buckling their car seats tight. My phone started buzzing in my pocket, but I silenced it and walked around to hug my wife. “Please be careful, honey. I love you.”

“I love you too,” she smiled, giving me a peck on the cheek. “I really wish you were going with us,” she said, with that sad smile like she was giving me one more chance to acquiesce. “A week is a really long time to be away from you.”

“Chloe, you know I would love to—but really, I just can’t. The next few days at work are gonna be nuts. It’s just bad timing.”
“You can write from anywhere you know…they have this thing called the Internet.”

“Honey, I’m sorry. You are going to have a great time with your parents, and you’ll be back before we know it.” My phone buzzed again.

“They’re going to be mad at you for not coming, you know,” she said.

“Won’t be the last time.”

“Who’s calling you?”

“I don’t know…probably someone from work about another deadline.” I reached down and silenced it once again. I bent down and kissed her on the forehead. “Goodbye, sweetheart. Be careful and have fun. Tell them I said hello and I’m sorry for not being able to get away from work.”

“I will,” she said, getting in the car. The back windows were down, and I peeked in to tell the boys goodbye. “Bye boys, y’all take care of mommy, okay?”

“Hug! Hug! Hug!” They both screamed.

“Okay, okay,” I said, opening the door and leaning in for Liam to wrap his tiny arms around my neck. He kissed me on the cheek. I walked around to the other side and did the same for Isaac, then closed the door and blew a kiss to them as they backed out of the driveway and started down the road.

My phone vibrated again, and I quickly reached in my pocket to grab it. The caller ID lit up—Jordan.

“Hello there,” I answered playfully.

“Jack! You were supposed to be here at six. Where are you? I was getting worried.”

“Just running a little bit late seeing them off, that’s all.”

“Okay, fair enough. But if you knew what was waiting for you you’d have left already.”

“You cooked me dinner? How sweet of you!”

“You know I don’t cook, Jack. But I am laying on my bed with a little lacy pink thing on.”

“Even better,” I said. “I’m getting in my car right now.” I put my phone back in my pocket and walked over to my car.
Before I got to the end of the road, my phone rang again. It was Chloe.

“Hey Chloe, something wrong?”

“No—I just forgot to ask you to be sure to take out the trash tonight. It’s getting piled up in the bin outside.”

“Sure I will.” I responded, heart rate increasing.

“Are you in your car? Where are you going?”

“Just out to get a bite to eat.” Sometimes I even surprised myself how quickly the lies came to mind.

“Oh okay. Go get yourself something good since you are a bachelor this week. You’re gonna need some energy for all that work you’ve got to do.”

“Yeah, I think I will. I might get some Olive Garden to go, I’ve been craving chicken alfredo something serious.”

“Mmm, that sounds good. That’s where our last date was, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, I think you’re right. It was.”

“That was too long ago—we need to get away soon, just me and you. I miss you, Jack.”

I thought about playing the joke that she had only been gone for two minutes, but it was clear she wasn’t talking about that. “I miss you too, honey. Be careful, and text me when you get there tonight so I’ll know you are okay.”

“Okay. Bye, Jack.” She hung up the phone. I swallowed deeply, evaded my conscience with the skill of a bullfighter, and lost myself in thoughts of Jordan in her lingerie for the rest of the drive.

I make myself sick.
One morning I woke up, I don’t remember when it was—and the first thought that popped into my head was, is this it? Is this all there is to life? Four or five more decades of this? If I’m lucky my 401(k) will do well and maybe I’ll get a boat, and then I’ll die and rot? It was a maddening thought.

That’s when I knew I had to find something. Anything. I think this happens to some people and they find a new hobby or a new career or just another beer. And I found Jordan. It’s really that simple I think.

Have you ever had that thought? What a despairing, suffocating thing it is. It took over my life, essentially. It told me what to do. It told me Jordan’s sparkling eyes just might be the cure-all for my despair.

I’m a deep thinker—always have been. It’s stuff like this that really bothers me, or things that I just can’t figure out. It tends to keep me up at night. Occasionally I take prescription sleeping pills to be able to sleep. Okay, maybe more than occasionally. Maybe every night. But the thing is, the thirty minutes between when I take my Ambien and when my head feels like a floating pool of motor oil are the worst. I’m not kidding, sometimes it feels almost unbearable. Side effects, I guess, though that is not on the warning label or the commercials.

“Warning: may make you think way too deeply about life than you are comfortable with. But don’t worry, it will knock you out soon after.”
I watch TV during that time to try to numb myself, but it never seems to work. One night I remember watching a special about the ancient Egyptians on the History channel. I watched the tombs and mummies being excavated, the archaeologists sweeping the dust around with their little brooms. Then, the thought: Dust. We are all going to be dust...me, my family, this house, everything. Then I curled up in a ball on my couch and waited for the heaviness to overwhelm me.

Then, there was the time that the Discovery channel got me in all kinds of a funk. I was trying to go to sleep when Planet Earth came on. Have you ever seen any of those? Incredible. It was probably a bad idea to watch it during one of my Ambien-induced throes, however.

So it comes on and I’m lying there watching these amazing shots of glaciers, barrier reefs, the Himalayas. Then—the damn whales. It was the whales that really got me. The massive, beautiful strides they take, sliding through the water effortlessly and making that noise that just might be able to put me to sleep without medication. And this horror came over me: What does this all mean? What is this crazy planet we all live on?

And then I thought about God. Thanks a lot, Ambien. I took another pill. And it made me late for work the next morning.

Do you ever think about the more meaningful questions of existence? I hope you aren’t watching so much TV that you don’t ever have to really think about anything. I heard the average American watches three hours of TV a day. I got curious a while back and added up what that means—twenty-one hours a week (obviously), over forty-four whole twenty-four hour days per year. Over an average seventy-year lifetime, 3,115 days would be spent doing nothing but watching TV.

That is eight and a half years of your life.

Yes, you heard that right. Seems like it might be wasting our lives. I don’t really want to lie on my deathbed and think about all the great TV I watched, do you? If that is you, I don’t mean to offend you. I’m just saying. Maybe you should go outside some. Spend time with friends. If you don’t have many friends, make
more. Read a book. I think you will be a happier person if your life doesn’t just consist of eat, TV, sleep, work, eat, TV.
So the next morning after Chloe left to go to her parents, I pulled away from Jordan’s condo to run home and shower before work. I was so sleepy that I stopped for a second longer at a stop sign to try to wake up enough to drive without killing somebody. As I did, I noticed a billboard with a familiar logo in the bottom right hand corner—it was a church that did a lot of advertising in the paper. Typically their ads featured their pastor sitting there with blinding white teeth, grinning like he just hit the lottery, and his wife standing there like she just walked out of the plastic surgeon’s office.

But my eyes cleared and it wasn’t. It was an ad that read in massive bold letters:

“CHRISTIANITY IS THE BEST THING FOR OUR BROKEN WORLD.”

You probably have heard of this church. And you most likely know that they are anything but the best thing. More of a political country club for upper-middle class white people. I guess this was their definition of making a difference in the community, huh? Pathetic.

As I drove home I got an idea. “Yep. It’s time.” I said to myself. Settled. Done. My frustration morphed into a smile...I was going to have some fun with this.

I sped to work that morning and churned out a column about the billboard.

It was titled, “I Respectfully Disagree.” I even got a picture of the billboard to put beside it. I opened it with, “Forgive me if I
am unimpressed with the contributions Christians and churches have made to society over the past few years.”

It was a pretty scathing indictment of Christianity, tackling the usual list of suspects: hypocrisy, judgment, lack of concern for the poor, televangelists, pastor scandals involving money, sex, or worse—child molestation. The Crusades. Slavery. And the fact that a lot of good-ole’ southern church people fought to keep the rebel flag flying at our state house—a reality that not only consistently hurts a lot of people, but our economy as well.

It was pretty harsh, though I did go back and edit a few times to scale it down to what I thought was reasonable. I ended it with the popular Gandhi quote: "I like your Christ, but I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”

Maybe you think it was too harsh of me. Or maybe you are right there in the boat with me and you have seen some ugly stuff. Trust me, nothing you have seen is as ugly as what I’ve seen.
One time I walked up to a guy named Ben, a Christian who works downstairs, and acted really sad. I asked him to pray for me and he perked up like he would rather do that than anything else in the world. He asked me what I needed prayer for. I told him that I believed I had been possessed by a demon the night before. I made up this elaborate story about how I was in my garage cleaning and listening to rock and roll, which I guess indeed is the devil’s music, because this demon crawled out of the radio somehow and took control of my body. I rolled my eyes in the back of my head and started convulsing, to show him what it was like. He flipped. I couldn’t keep it up, however, and started laughing. He huffed out of his cubicle. I’m not sure we’ve talked since then.

Would you like to hear about the time I got “saved”? I may as well be straightforward with you.

I was maybe ten years old, and Uncle Richard had dragged Sara and me to a revival service at his church because he was babysitting us that night so Mom could work. I despised the smell of that place, and even more so I detested Uncle Richard’s stank breath that would shower us while we sang hymns we didn’t know. Ladies in their frills and flowers would swoon over Richard, pinching our cheeks and all that rot.

He was a good deal older than Mom, but still single, or a “eunuch,” as he called it. He was a big help for a single mom, he always said. He had a better job than Mom, working in sales at an office supply company, and he never seemed to do much outside of
working and serving as a deacon at his church. As much as I hated this man, I’d be lying if I said he never put food on our table.

I tried to daydream as much as possible during the service, but the visiting preacher, with all his pomp and circumstance and angry diatribes and hellfire, made that difficult. His long, bony finger looked like a lightning bolt could jolt out of it at any second.

Near the end, he transitioned into what he called the invitation. He told everyone to bow their heads and close their eyes, and to raise their hand if they wanted to respond to his invitation, start behaving, and be saved. I didn’t even realize my eyes were open, I don’t think. I just sat there, eyelids glued back, taking in this moment that seemed some grown-up secret that kids weren’t privy to.

“I see that hand, brother. Amen. Repent today” the preacher man said, then paused for a moment.

“Yes sister, I see that hand. And you too, brother, I see your hand. Glory to God…welcome to the kingdom of the beloved.”

But no one was raising a hand. Not a single soul.

I stared wide-eyed at the preacher in a moment of bewilderment. Suddenly, the man’s eyes met mine and I panicked like a thief caught in the very act. I had no idea what to do, so I quickly shut my eyes and put my head down. Very reverently, of course. My heart thumped the wall of my tiny chest.

But then he asked the boy in the blue shirt to come down front. I kept my head down and ignored it until Uncle Richard elbowed me in the side. I was the only boy in there, so you really didn’t even need the blue shirt qualifier.

When I finally reached the front I thought I might pass out. I steadied my knees and stood tall as the preacher man knelt down eye level with me. “Do you understand your wickedness, son?” he said, loud enough for everyone to hear.

I nodded my head up and down, thinking it was most likely the correct answer.

“Do you want to repent of your unrighteousness and be saved from the demons of hell?”

I nodded once more, then looked over my shoulder at Uncle Richard, who wore a dumb, approving smile plastered on his face. I
didn’t want to do anything to make him smile. When I turned back to face the preacher man, he stared into my eyes with the ferocity of a pissed off cat. He was close enough now for me to feel his wet breath on the top of my nose. His sweat smelled like fried okra and made me want to puke.

“Wonderful, then,” he said, standing up again and shifting his eyes away from mine slowly. He put his hand firmly around the back of my neck and presented me to the congregation.

“Join me as I pray over this lad’s soul,” the preacher said, proceeding into a quality-sounding prayer like something you hear on TV. And just like that, I was saved. From what, I wasn’t sure.

After the prayer I trekked back to my pew, avoiding the stares and smiles pointed at me. Uncle Richard put his arm around me as the congregation stood to sing. The only lines of that hymn that stuck in my mind are, “washed in the blood of Jesus.”

Only, I didn’t feel washed.

In fact, I felt dirtier than ever.
So yeah, that should give you an idea of what my experience with Christianity was like. My mom was unintentionally unreligious while we were growing up, so the only tastes I got were from my uncle.

I still get a queasy feeling in my stomach when I see his name. Has this ever happened to you? You see something or hear something and it makes a connection in your mind somehow, and this memory or image comes to mind of something that happened to you in the past, and for a moment you really believe that it didn’t really happen to you. It was someone else, it is a scene from a bad movie or something, but it didn’t really happen to you. Then, you see the picture again and realize the little boy or little girl, or teen-ager or adult in the scene is you and the horror that you had forgotten punches you in the stomach? Repression, they call it. I think that word doesn’t do the feeling justice. It should be a much nastier word that feels more grotesque and weighty. It should sound harsh and throat-punchy.

I hope you don’t have anything that you need to repress. I really, really do. I hope there is nothing but smiles in the deepest memory banks you have.

You may have guessed this already, but I have to tell you, I think. I hope I can trust you. I hope this has never happened to you.

I don’t forget that this really happened to me. But at the same time, I do. Does that make sense?
A while back I was walking through the kids section at Barnes and Noble, looking for something for Liam and Isaac. I walked past an old-school book about Barbie, and in an instant this scene in my memory unlocked and unleashed its fury on me.

I’m sitting on the floor in Uncle Richard’s house one night, maybe eight or nine years old, watching some cartoon on TV. I’m oblivious to the world, but shaken out of the stupor by Sara screaming. I get up and run down the hall, pushing open Uncle Richard’s bedroom door. Sara is lying across the foot of his bed, naked, Uncle Richard standing over her, fumbling with his pants.

That piece of shit.

I yelled, “What are you doing to her?” and ran over and swung at him as hard as I could. He caught my fist in motion and squeezed it, twisted my arm behind my back until I screamed.

I made eye contact with Sara, her head cocked over to the side, blonde curls hanging off the bed. The wildness in her eyes petrified me. I lashed out one more time, threatened to tell Mom about what he was doing. I didn’t fully know what was happening, I don’t think, but it felt like the most wrong thing I could imagine at the time.

He bent down and put his hand around my throat, starting to squeeze. “You tell your mom anything about this—I will hurt your sister very badly. You hear me?” I couldn’t breathe at all, much less shake my head. “Remember what your mom told you, God wants you to obey your elders.” With that, he let go of me and I choked on oxygen. “Now take your clothes off, Jack.” He then held up two dolls—a Barbie and a Ken, both without clothes, and said something about a game we were going to play.

Shit…I’m about to cry. I’m sorry, I need to go for now. I need a beer.
Okay. I’m back. Sorry about that. I got some fresh air and then got a Guinness. Isn’t it awesome that Immac sells beer as well as coffee? I wish every coffee shop did. Sometimes you just need both, you know?

It sucks that typically in life we forget the things we want to remember, but remember the things we want to forget.

Isn’t it crazy how our scars stay with us? I mean, I would think that after so many years I would be able to put that stuff behind me for good. But even now if it hits me at the right time it can land me in the fetal position. What gets me the most is thinking about Sara. That precious, sweet little girl. And the truckload of issues she has now because of him.

I was talking with someone a while back who is in his fifties. He was telling me about how badly he was teased when he was in middle school and high school. Sissy, faggot, they called him. He said to this day when he hears those words he cringes and he can feel the same pain as he did back then. He had a high school reunion a while back and the day of, he decided that he couldn’t go. He was afraid to be there because of three guys that were the worst bullies, who were so mean to him that he couldn’t even talk about it. Can you believe that? He stayed home from his high school reunion because he couldn’t stand to face people that he hadn’t seen in decades.

A few weeks later, he ran into one of the guys in a grocery store. The guy was nice and acted like they were just long lost
friends, like he was so happy to have run into him. My friend told me the only thing he could think was, “Do you not remember everything you did to me?”

It really is crazy how much damage we human beings can inflict on one another.

I mean really, being human is a tough thing to figure out. I know that. One big predicament—the human predicament, I call it. But, you would think that if figuring out life was so difficult, then all of us humans would kind of be on the same team, you know? We would be looking out for one another and trying to support each other. Or at least staying out of each other’s way.

But—have you ever thought about the fact that when you come home at night you lock the door? Why do you do that? You are not keeping a raccoon from coming in and sitting on your living room floor. You are keeping other people out. Other humans, who are in this giant predicament right beside you.

I would venture to say that like me, the greatest wounds you have by far have come from other people. People that you loved, admired, cherished and respected, and maybe still do. But they have hurt you the worst. It’s like we all carry around these little knives and we are constantly cutting each other, and occasionally we just stab one in really, really deep.

I don’t want you to think that my life was nothing but this awful string of memories like the ones I’ve shared. Don’t worry, my life is not one of those stories that just gets worse and worse until it’s almost unbelievable that all of that happened to one human being. Those stories do happen—I know people with them. But I am not one of them.

I have so many happy memories from growing up that I could not begin to put them on paper. Mom, Sara and I were a tight family and Mom did everything she could to fill in the gap left by an absent father. Single moms are saints in my book, hands down. One time she even dressed up like Santa Claus late one Christmas Eve and totally tricked us.

When I was a teenager, she needed to teach me how to shave, so she put shaving cream all over her face, laughing the
whole time, and used the back of a plastic razor to pretend shave her face and show me how. That was classic Mom.

I didn’t know this until much later, but she sold every piece of jewelry she had to pay for me to play Little League.
So there was a bit of an uproar about my column, but honestly not as much as I’d thought. I guess all the Christians took my warning seriously and put on their nice faces. I think that some people started a “Pray for Jack Bennett” Facebook group, which made me laugh. Hey, I’ll take any prayers I can get, you know?

I was driving my usual late Sunday morning route to the coffee shop—it’s my routine time every week to go relax while Chloe watches the kids. It was pouring rain and I was beyond frustrated because my windshield wiper blades were dried out and making that incredibly annoying squeaky sound. It has always made me cringe—that same sound of balloons being rubbed or styrofoam egg cartons. Ugh, I hate it. I tried turning them off, to see if I could see through the torrent. No such luck. Being annoyed is better than being dead.

I passed what I call the church on my way every week. What I mean by the church is the small little church that always has the most memorable sayings on their marquis. Some of them were hilarious, in a sad sort of way.

On Mother’s Day: Shock Your Mom—Come To Church. That one may be my all-time favorite.

Don’t Worry—Our Church Is Prayer Conditioned.
Party In Hell Cancelled Due To Fire.
Want To Be Friends With Jesus, Angels And Saints? Try “Faith Book!”
You Have To Wonder About Humans. They Think God Is Dead
And Elvis Is Alive!

Google Doesn’t Have All Of The Answers.

Yikes. What a clever bunch. And apparently they’ve never been on Google.

You may not even believe this next part. That’s fine. I don’t believe it either.

I was hoping for a funny one that week. So when the letters became visible through the rain, I read the message aloud to myself:

What If Jack Is Right About Us?

I wasn’t sure what I’d seen at first. I pulled into the church driveway to make sure I wasn’t seeing things. I looked over, past the twenty or so cars in the parking lot toward the glowing stained-glass windows protruding from the grey morning, squinting through the rain towards the sign. But from the parking lot, it was hard to see.

And that’s when I saw him.

A man, standing there, knocking on the door of the church.

And the door was not opening.

I turned the car off and sat for a second, watching the poor man in horror—the sign suddenly far from my mind. From the back he looked like a typical middle-aged white man you’d see at the library downtown, most likely homeless, but you couldn’t tell for sure. He had on a blue Piggly Wiggly shirt, tattered blue jeans, and a dirty green backpack slung over one shoulder. His graying brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail. And he was standing there underneath the awning, calmly, gently knocking on the door.

So I got out of the car.

What else could I do?

My left foot splashed in a puddle on the way, soaking my shoe. I tried to shake the water off and made my way to the steps. I couldn’t bring myself to run through the rain—I guess it was just too unusual of a situation for hurrying.

So I walked up the stairs, my hair dripping morning rain onto shoulders.
*Knock, knock, knock,* I heard as I reached the top step and the shelter of the awning above. I was standing twenty feet behind the man, who was still clueless to my presence.

*Knock, knock.* The man put his head down. I swallowed the awkward lump in my throat and shuffled my feet a little on the thin carpet, hoping he’d hear me and turn around. He didn’t.

“Hello there,” I finally mustered, when I could take it no longer.
He turns, not quickly, no—I may even say he turns quite confidently for a man in his predicament. The first thing I notice about him is his eyes. They are—how can I describe them? Not noticeably beautiful or colored, but penetrating. Yes, penetrating, that’s the word. Big, brown, piercing eyes that seem to hold your gaze for longer than is customary. The rest of his weathered face reveals little, but his eyes own a peaceful, slow gaze over me, and to my surprise, he didn’t seem very embarrassed at all. It had been a while since I’d gone down to the shelter to serve—more than a while if I’m honest—and I guess I’d forgotten how being homeless could steal the last trace of dignity from a soul.

“Hello,” he responds, his beard cracking with a smile.

He confused me, to be honest. So many of these fellows, you know, have that look about them—that frightened, untrusting, frantic look that seems to cloud every facet of their interaction with others. But this man, though nowhere near as advanced in years, made you feel like you were meeting your grandpa for coffee. He just had that air about him.

He made no rush to say anything else, so I ventured out with the first thing that popped in my head. “Maybe they didn’t hear you?” I tried to rope it in towards the end of the sentence, to change it to something less, well, stupid, but it was to no avail. I was cursed with a quick tongue.

“Oh no, they heard me all right.” He answered. “A nice gentleman escorted me out here and told me to come back when I was
more presentable. I started knocking, and they just started singing louder when I didn’t stop.”

I leaned over toward the door and caught the wave of voices. There was a crescendo of music, and then the chorus:

I have decided, to follow Jesus.
I have decided, to follow Jesus.
I have decided, to follow Jesus.
No turning back, no turning back.
Though none go with me, I still will follow…

They continued and I turned back to the man. I remembered the song from way back when, and my heart burned with fury at these imbeciles and with compassion for my new friend. The man still stood silently, smiling like a kid who just got left out of dodge ball but didn’t want to let on that his feelings were hurt.

“Don’t worry about these morons,” I said as reassuringly as possible. He looked down at his feet. “Hey, are you hungry?” I asked. “Would you be up for some coffee and a bagel?”

“Yes, I think I would like that, thank you very much.” He answered. “It’s been a while since I’ve had a good meal, and some hot coffee would hit the spot.”

“Perfect.” I said, glad to be able to take him away from his misery here. Before turning to walk, I gave the locked double door a swift kick for good measure, and the frame rattled and shook. I’d like to think it scared the bejeezus out of at least one person.

We jogged through the rain and jumped into my Range Rover. “Sorry about getting the seat wet,” he remarked, fingering the leather after closing the passenger side door.

“No problem…it won’t hurt them at all.” I lied. I had just bought the car—used, but still. I was cringing on the inside.

“I’m not interrupting anything, am I?” he asked.

“No…” I answered. “I was just headed to get some breakfast myself, and I’ve got plenty of time. No rush.”

“Okay, good.”

“A bagel sounds delicious right about now,” I said as I pulled out of the church parking lot and onto the main road, trying to re-
assure him that he was no bother. “I’m glad I ran into you this morning—” I stopped as I realized the extent of my rudeness. “I’m sorry, sir, I never asked your name.”

“Well, my friends call me Yeshua. So you can call me that since you just got me out of this weather…”

“Yeshua,” I repeated. “That’s an unusual name. I like it. Nice to officially meet you, Yeshua. My name is Jack. It’s a pleasure.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” he responded, giving me a firm shake. “Thanks for picking me up.” He smiled like he was really glad to see me, but I guess anyone would be happy to get out of that situation.

And if you think you know where this is going, just wait.
We went to Cool Beans (because Immac is closed on Sundays), ordered a couple of bacon egg and cheese on everythings, and sat down at a table in the corner, glad to be out of the weather. The rain fell cautiously down the window behind my new friend’s back, and he began to eat like he hadn’t in a while.

“Mmm…mmm.” He said, after a few bites. “Delicious.”

“Indeed,” I responded, finishing a sip of coffee. I hesitated to talk much because I wanted to let him eat and enjoy his warm coffee. The awkward silence ended up getting the best of me though, as it typically does. “So, Yeshua, what’s your story?”

His eyes gleamed a bit and he raised his head, pondering the question. “What’s my story?” he said. “Well, that depends on how much time you have.”

“Oh, I’m all ears,” I responded, but also glanced down at my watch to politely let him know that I did not want to spend all day here.

He got the clue, and responded by smiling and not launching into his life story, sipping his coffee like it was getting lukewarm too fast. I felt bad, so I said the first thing that came to my mind. “So, what brought you to the church this morning? I guess that’s the first time you’ve ever been locked out of a church, huh?”

He chuckled. “No, I wish. To be truthful, I’ve been locked out of a fair share of churches in my day.” I gave him a confused squint, but kept silent. He cleared his throat and went on.

“Did you read that column in last week’s paper?”
“The column about Christianity?”
“Yes, that one.”
“Actually, I wrote it.”
“You did? Wow. So you’re Jack Bennett, huh? The man, the myth, the legend…”
“Ha, funny—yeah, that’s me.”
“I’ve been reading your column for a long time. You’re a good writer. You’ve gotten into some interesting territory with this column I bet. Were you out driving around just in case picketers came to your house?”
“Ha. No, not really. I doubt that will happen. I hope not, at least.”
“You never know,” he said, grinning.
“So what did you think of the column? I assume you’re a Christian, even though the church you were at this morning just proves my point.”
“Yes, you are right about that—that particular church is nothing but arrows in your bag. Unfortunately, I think you are right about a good bit of stuff in the column.” He paused for a moment, letting that sink in as he sipped his coffee. “However, I also think you have a lot to learn.”
“Is that right?” I responded, playing along. “And who is going to teach me what I’ve got to learn?”
He paused for a moment, as if my rhetorical question hadn’t been rhetorical. “Well, I could, if you’re willing to learn anything from a guy in my situation.” He winked at me, and I didn’t really know how to respond.
He went on, “What about breakfast here every Sunday morning, around this time? Next time will be my treat.”
I thought for a moment, and felt a little guilty about how long it had really been since I’d done anything to help anyone who didn’t have it as good as me.
“Sure, I could do that,” I answered.
“But, you know, if your faith is important to you, I don’t want to keep you out of church…” I gave a dramatic pause, then went on. “Oh, wait a minute, never mind—it’s your fellow believers
who are doing that.” I hoped it wouldn’t be too much—he seemed to have a good sense of humor.

“Touché, my friend, touché. Well, you just don’t worry about that. And watch out or you and I might be having church right here in the coffee shop.” I laughed at that, glad that he wasn’t mad at my joke. His laugh was deep and throaty, one where you just wanted to keep making the person laugh to hear it.

He looked around at the other people at Cool Beans and got fidgety. “Well, Mr. Jack Bennett, local celebrity writer, I don’t need to take up more of your time today. But I’ll see you next week. Don’t leave me hanging—I’d hate to waste a perfectly good bacon egg and cheese on everything.”

“Okay, I won’t. Nice to meet you.” He got up and pushed his chair under the table, leaning over it.

“Oh, one more thing, Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“I’d like you to do something for me this week.”

“Okay,” I said, a bit surprised at his boldness. “What is it?”

“Repent of cheating on your wife and beg for her forgiveness. She is the best thing you have going for you and trust me, you don’t need to screw it up anymore than you already have.”

From the word ‘repent,’ that was the longest breathless period of my life.

“And if you don’t expose the affair, I will.”

I turned blue as he walked toward the door, then shouted back over his shoulder, “Thanks for the bagel,” as he slipped out.

My stomach did a cartwheel and pushed all the buttons that make you want to puke.
A BOOK ABOUT FORGIVENESS, SATISFACTION, AND THE SINS OF THE CHURCH

Jack Bennett has a wife, two kids, the perfect job—and the perfect affair. When he is caught and it all comes crashing down, Jack is left with no one to turn to. No friends. No family, except his recovering drug addict of a sister.

On a Sunday morning drive, he sees a homeless man locked out of a church service, banging on the door. He stops and offers the guy a cup of coffee. He asks the man his name, and the guy says Yeshua. As in, Jesus.

Jack’s not stupid. This isn’t the real Jesus. But with nowhere else to turn, Jack forms an unlikely friendship—one that will test his idea of truth, faith, love, and forgiveness. And Jack is completely unprepared for the real-life twists his story is going to take.

Brandon Clements is a pastor in Columbia, SC. He drinks coffee black, once hit a cow with a truck (the cow lived), and adores his wife Kristi. Find him at brandonclements.com or @brandonclements on Twitter.

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