



Jeebus

a novel

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by
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(Cover Photo by Omar Ram; UnSplash.com)

I'm no missionary, I don't even believe in Jeebus! ... Save me, Jeebus!

- Homer Simpson

(The Simpsons - Episode 15, Season 11 - "Missionary: Impossible")

Jeebus - Variation of *Jesus* first invented by Duke Ellington so as not to be beaten by nuns. Borrowed by Frank Zappa and, from there, by Matt Groening.

(UrbanDictionary.com - Comment by "mavi", August 30, 2007)

1.

I met Anthony “Jeebus” Morelli when I attended Mrs. Allenby’s Junior High Sunday School class the first Sunday after my old man moved my mother and me to Seattle, from Boise, Idaho.

He had his hair in a ponytail, years before boys our age did that. It was midnight black and tied with a leather strap, several crimson beads dangling.

He wore black horn-rimmed glasses and a pair of cowboy boots, the frayed legs of his Levis tucked in the tops, with a leather vest over a black *Eugene for President* t-shirt, which appeared to be hand-painted.

My parents were Republicans, so I assumed Jeebus was a communist sympathizer. This thrilled me.

As soon as I saw him I began to rehearse the arguments I would use to persuade my dad to let me grow my hair out. My mom would need no persuasion.

I wondered if there were glasses for people who didn’t really need them. People who wanted to be like Jeebus.

I tried to imagine him in Boise. The guys at West Boise Junior High would have piled on him and pulled his pants down to his knees. Gabe McGraw would have pulled out his switchblade and lopped off the ponytail.

No, I’m wrong about that, come to think. Fact is, I would have seen them looking for fake black hornrim glasses at Carney’s Drug Store. Gabe would have offered to be Jeebus’ bodyguard.

Even now I don’t know why he singled me out for attention. I was not then, and am not now, one who draws attention.

At Blumann family reunions, when I bother to attend them, the question asked most frequently of me is *What was your name again?*

That morning Jeebus held a chair open for me, which required him to prevent a stunning junior-high-going-on-college-freshman blonde cheerleader type from sitting next to him.

This so astonished me that I looked around to see who else he must have invited to sit there. He had to come over, grab me by my skinny bicep, and lead me to the chair.

“Well, cowboy, welcome to Sunday School. Let’s rustle you a chair,” he said, in a dubious John Wayne impression.

“Barbie here can sit next to Lawrence. You’re welcome, Lawrence.”

Lawrence was too busy exploring his left nostril with his pointer finger to notice that the sexual highlight reel of his young manhood was about to be recorded, when Barbie (real name Louise) would be

forced to squeeze in next to him, such that their thighs would touch.

I had barely introduced myself - Melvin "Blue" Blumann (as *Blue*, of course, not *Melvin*, for obvious reasons) - when he instructed me to call him *Jeebus*.

I learned later that he read somewhere that Duke Ellington used *Jeebus* instead of *Jesus*, to avoid recrimination from nuns at his Catholic school, whenever he had a good reason to exclaim *Jeebus!* about something.

At some point, weeks later, I questioned him about co-opting an alternate name for Our Lord and Saviour. He suggested I should get the stick out of my ass.

It was late October, 1968. Hubert Humphrey had high hopes, apparently still stunned by the tear gas from the Democratic Convention in Chicago, and Dad had landed a gig as manager of Svensson and Svensson Insurance, in Ballard, Seattle's *lutefisk*-swilling Scandahoovian neighborhood.

My mother was shattered by the move, since most of her family was Boise born-and-bred, but Dad was coming off three months when he sold a total of three whole-life insurance policies, and those were to a cousin and two brothers-in-law.

I had overheard loud discussions about losing our house. Svensson and Svensson was a salaried gig, so that was that.

I was inebriated with joy. Boise had its potato-eyed charms, and I would miss my West Boise Junior High School co-conspirators, but this was *Seattle*. There'd been a *World's Fair* here!

My father, Melvin Blumann, Junior, (myself being Melvin "Blue" Blumann, the Third) is about as religious as Groucho Marx, or maybe I'm thinking of Karl Marx, but Dad thought he knew about churches.

"Melvin," he said. (He refused to call me *Blue*.) "Melvin, a big church like Green Lake Lutheran will be a gusher of business."

In Boise we'd been Episcopalians, because Dad said that's where the money was. Plus, Episcopalians aligned more with his politics than did the Baptists or the Catholics.

According to Dad, Seattle Lutherans were close to Boise Episcopalians, politically speaking, and the church was within walking distance of our newly rented house.

That first morning in Green Lake Lutheran Sunday School changed my life more than anything before or since, and I say that having walked through the front door of my house, ten years later, to see my almost new bride, Ashley Anne, in the middle of our living room, performing some sort of porno sex maneuver with Jimbo, our next-door neighbor, while what I thought were the members of her book club cheered them on.

We'll come back to this.

That Sunday Jeebus insisted that we do an improvised re-enactment of the week's Bible study.

"Blue," he told me, "first impressions are important. Follow my lead and we'll have Mrs. Allenby wrapped around our pinky fingers when we need her permission to boogie out of here for one reason or another. Trust me: she loves it when I do this shit."

Until that moment, it hadn't occurred to me that one could say *shit* in one's Sunday School Class, even if it *was* Lutheran.

Jeebus' plan made sense to me, having made a successful elementary school career from good first impressions, with my teachers and Mrs. Jackman, who ran the West Boise Elementary office.

The Bible Study that Sunday morning featured the time Jesus Rambo'd into the temple and blew up the scam the temple moneychangers were using to rob the poor *schmucks* who needed exact change to buy a pigeon to sacrifice to Yahweh. The *vig* those gangsters skimmed was worse than how my dad talked about Democrat tax plans.

We hashed out the details over apple juice and soda crackers, served by Mrs. Allenby to keep us occupied while she lined up her cast of cloth cut-out characters who would be moved around her flannel-covered board to depict the temple rumpus.

It bothered me a little that we were setting up to bedevil Mrs. Allenby. She reminded me of my Aunt Jenny, on my mom's side, whom I adored.

Mrs. Allenby seemed elderly, though, looking back, she was probably in her forties. Petite and olive-skinned, her dark, graying hair in braids, she smiled endlessly. I loved listening to her sing *Jesus Loves the Little Children of the World* and *Amazing Grace*.

Somehow Jeebus and I ended up with twice as many crackers as any of the other students. It occurred to me even then that serving apple juice and soda crackers to fourteen and fifteen-year-olds, and using a flannel board, seemed out of touch.

It turned out Mrs. Allenby had been promoted from the pre-school class without much time for training. *If it ain't broke, don't fix it.*

Based on the soda cracker score alone, I already felt more grateful to be inexplicably attached to Jeebus than I can remember feeling about any of my other friends, before or since. *Ever.*

"Here's the deal," he said to me. "Mrs. Allenby always passes around a piggy bank to collect money for the poor. If you think about it, that's kind of like collecting money as a sacrifice to Yahweh."

"I'm pretty sure Jewish people wouldn't have used a *piggy* bank," I said.

I explained the dietary rules about pork. Don't eat animal flesh unless the animal chews a cud and has a split hoof. It's not *kosher*.

I was pretty pleased to have an opportunity to impress him.

"Screw that," he said, "are you in or out?"

"I'm in," I said.

"Okay," he said, "then stop with the dumbass arguments."

The plan was that I would volunteer to pass the bank around, doing my best to impersonate a moneychanger. We talked about some alternative line readings.

I proposed *Hey, hey, hey, two dimes for a quarter, three quarters for a dollar.*

Jeebus favored *Get your sins forgiven! Get your exact change right here. Give the priest the bird!*

"C'mon, man, it's funny and you know it," Jeebus said.

"Maybe so," I said, "but *your* parents probably won't twist *your* damn ear off when we get reported for saying it."

I would learn later that I was dead wrong about that. Jeebus' father, his only remaining parent, was willing and able to *cut* his son's ear off and serve it to him for breakfast.

"Okay," Jeebus said, after I caved and agreed to use his line, "after you've passed the bank around a little, I will come flying out of my chair and yell, *It is written, my house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.*"

This could have been a personal best moment for me, up there with Lawrence getting to rub thighs with Barbie/Louise. It could have been, except I blew my lines and went right to *Give the priest the bird.*

Jeebus went rogue and shouted "*My house shall be called the house of prayer, but ye have made it a den of whoremongers and thieves.*"

I was more shocked than Mrs. Allenby. I didn't know what a *whoremonger* was, and I wondered how Jeebus knew.

We probably had whores in Boise, but my group spent more time in the library thumbing through *National Geographics* looking for bare bosoms than walking streets where we might have encountered the real thing. *Prostitutes, not bare bosoms.* This was Boise!

Jeebus and I were banished to the empty Sunday School room that served as solitary confinement, where Jeebus explained what a whore was and I pondered how long it would take me to save up enough to become a whoremonger.

I did get an ear-twisting when my mom heard about our guerrilla theater, but I never found out what happened to Jeebus.

When I next saw him he refused to tell me. At least he still had both ears.

2.

There are dozens of Jeebus stories, like the time he made me climb onto the roof of the parsonage, where he used a power tool to remove the skylight.

Then he rigged this rope and gunny sack thing so I could lower him into the middle of a prayer meeting, just like when the crippled dude was lowered into the middle of a crowd in a house where Jesus was.

I practically dropped him and I think a couple of old ladies shit their diapers.

Or, the time Jeebus made me come along to help re-enact that scene from *American Graffiti*, where the Pharaohs car club delinquents make Richard Dreyfuss crawl around and tie a cable to the axle of a cop car, then hook the other end to something solid.

Then he and a Pharaoh go speeding past the cop car and Dreyfuss leans out the car window and flips off the cops while yelling, *Here's five for justice*.

Of course, when the cops take off after him, the cable yanks off their entire fucking back axle. Hilarious.

When Jeebus and I did it we tied the cable to Abe Moskowitz' pickup truck, but it just snapped where it was looped around the trailer hitch. The recoil wrapped the cable around the fire hydrant it was anchored to and that was that.

Except that Abe saw us running in the opposite direction, flipped a u-turn, and chased us for a half-mile. He didn't catch us, but he got close enough to ID us.

We had to do twenty hours of community service in order to keep our criminal records clean.

Jeebus figured out that we could do our service at the Food Bank, which turned out to be a hoot. It was at the Community Center and we spent most of our time playing ping-pong and basketball with classmates who showed up in line.

Not to mention we scored boxes full of groceries, since Jeebus' old man was a familiar face at the Food Bank and all Jeebus had to say was he was filling a box for him.

Jeebus was everything I wasn't, and then some. He put the *joie* in *joie de vivre*. He *joied* the hell out of *vivre*. I spent years wanting to be some version of Jeebus, longing to shed my own self like a cocoon and join him flitting around like a bright winged thing.

I learned the hard way that there are few things as fragile as butterfly wings.

3.

One Sunday morning, a month or so after we met in church, Jeebus said we had to *go forward to the altar*, the next time there was an *altar call*, and *accept Jesus as our personal Saviour* or we wouldn't be able to be baptized.

"I have zero interest in being baptized," I said. "Plus, I don't go to the Sunday night service where all that *Jesus as your personal Saviour* bullshit goes on."

Sunday nights were considered *evangelistic meetings*, sometimes conducted by visiting professional evangelists especially chosen for their sales skills. There was always an altar call, according to Jeebus.

This is where the church organist, Mrs. Beezly, would play a hymn like *Just As I Am*, or *The Old Rugged Cross*, and audience members who were looking to be absolved of guilt for offenses ranging from touching themselves inappropriately, to staying home on Sunday mornings with hangovers, would stumble down the aisle and drape themselves over the altar rail in front of the pulpit, waiting for the evangelist to come down and lead them in a prayer for forgiveness.

For newbies, the prayer would be for Jesus to not only forgive them for *buffin' the muffin* or *cuffin' the carrot*, but an invitation for him to take up residence (metaphorically, I assumed) in their hearts, as their own personal Savior.

I got this all from Jeebus, because I had never witnessed this perp walk, since Sunday Morning service attendance was deemed enough to establish my dad's credibility with sales prospects from the congregation.

Furthermore, I had yet to witness a baptismal, which followed on the invitation extended to Jesus during the altar call, as a kind of confirmation-by-dunking.

This ceremony was always conducted after the main morning service, when the evening service had produced sufficient candidates to justify heating up the baptismal font, located behind a scrim hanging at the back of the raised platform, behind the pulpit and the piano and benches for the choir.

The morning service was over at eleven-thirty and my parents always left promptly after morning service.

After my feeble objection to the altar-call-baptismal charade, Jeebus told me to get the stick out of my ass and had me follow him into the men's room where he shared his secret knowledge.

It turns out that Lisa Marie Jensen was on the program for the next baptismal service, which was scheduled for the following Sunday.

Jeebus' aunt was the church secretary and knew a week in advance who the candidates were for the next baptismal, since she composed and mimeographed the Church Bulletin.

"Dude," he said (*dude* was just becoming a thing at the time), "you don't understand. The white dresses the girls wear into the baptismal go all see-through when they get wet. You can see their underwear. If they're even wearing underwear."

Now I understood. Lisa Marie Jensen was the Dolly Parton of the junior high class, and seeing her underwear, or - dear God, please - what was beneath her underwear - would be a transcendent religious experience.

"So," he said, "tonight we have to go forward at the altar call."

4.

Odd things happened when I attended the revival meeting that night, well beyond the inherent oddness of the whole enterprise.

For one thing, the evangelist, Father Brennan, was not at all what I expected. Instead of the pompadoured country-western singer *wannabes* I'd seen introduced on other Sunday mornings prior to a Sunday evening evangelistic service, this guy was a renegade Catholic priest.

Renegade as in he had been married, *and divorced*, all while still a robed-up parish priest. Apparently he'd fallen head-over-cassock for a widow in his church and they'd eloped to Vegas, where they were married in a chapel run by an Elvis impersonator with a Universal Life Minister's license. I may be making up that last bit.

Of course it took about two weeks for his priestly ass to get the right boot of dis-fellowship and *get the fuck out of here* from the Bishop in charge of his Diocese. Since then he'd taken his show on the road, mostly in non-Catholic venues.

His show consisted of describing how, after the divorce, he'd become a drunk of the sort who wakes up at ten a.m., on a week-day morning, and can't remember how he came to be where he woke up or how long he'd been there. *Where he woke up* being the sidewalk in front of Macy's, or City Hall, in downtown Kansas City, face-down in a pool of his own body fluids.

At some point he was ordered into treatment by a compassionate Irish municipal judge, himself a Catholic and recovering drunk.

During his forty days and forty nights at a remote treatment center in the high desert near Victorville, California, Father Brennan said he came to understand the parable of the Prodigal Son. This still gives me shivers.

According to Father Brennan, the Creator is like a father who has a fuckup son and a good son, the older one.

The bad seed younger son insists on claiming a traditional right to have his share of the family property distributed to him early, before the old man croaks.

Dad is disappointed, but complies. Bad Seed takes his props in the form of cash and boogies off to *a far country* where he shares his inheritance with drug dealers and hookers.

One morning he wakes up after a particularly dishevelled episode and decides it's time to cut his losses.

By this time he's spent his bankroll into overdraft and is scrabbling by with a job slopping hogs. For a Jewish kid, apparently that's like a rabbi opening a Barbecued Pork Palace on the main drag

through Jerusalem.

Bad Seed limps homeward. He has a plan. He'll offer to be the low man on the totem pole of Dad's hired servants, with no pay.

In the meantime, Dad has gotten word from the village gossips that his son is headed home. He has his own plan. It involves hiring a band, rolling out a red carpet that leads straight to a banquet table, along with a robe and a ring that symbolize that his boy's legal inheritance rights are fully restored.

When all is ready, his scouts report that sonny boy is nearing the homestead. Dad waits, barely restrained from happy dancing, until he sees the boy, at which point the restraints are off. He runs over, grabs his son, and smothers him with bear hugs and sloppy kisses.

The boy tries to explain his plan to redeem himself with free labor, but this just launches Dad into laughter.

That is not the plan. The plan is unconditional, no consequences, (other than those the boy has already suffered) love. No penalties. Full-on forgiveness and restoration.

Father Brennan insisted, face glistening with penitential tears, that *this* is the Gospel in its original form, before the opportunists and puritans and legalists got hold of it and squeezed the love out of it.

He also pointed out that it was the older son, Good Son, with his inflated sense of self-righteousness, who nearly shit on the proceedings, out of resentment of his father's *blind* beneficence.

If all this was a minor revelation to me, for Jeebus it was an emotional earthquake.

Twenty minutes into Father Brennan's redemption story Jeebus stood up and started crying and moaning, like his old man was flogging him with an electrical cord right there in front of everybody.

(That would come later, in the privacy of his home. Jimmy "The Mutt" Morelli wasn't going to stand for a son of his whimpering like a teenage girl who just lost her puppy, not without making a teaching moment out of it.)

The priest's story came to a halt and an altar call was sounded immediately. The organist launched into the soundtrack, while the priest crooned the lyrics: *Just as I am, without one plea, But that Thy blood was shed for me, And that Thou bid'st me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come! I come!*

Jeebus all but sprinted down the aisle and laid his snot-smearred cheek on the wooden altar rail. I couldn't believe it.

Afterwards, I made him come with me into the same Sunday School room where he'd first layed out the etymology of the word *whoremonger*.

"What the hell, Jeebus?" I asked.

“Dude,” he said, “I got it. I totally got it.”

He sniffed up a drip and started tearing up, again.

“Blue, it’s like we’re prodigal sons, but it’s all okay. Seriously, Blue, *it’s all okay.*”