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WWJD

by

Anna Christina Kohler Lewis

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Brigham Young University

August 2008

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Anna Christina Kohler Lewis

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Anna Lewis in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including tables, figures, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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ABSTRACT

WWJD

Anna Christina Kohler Lewis

Department of English

Master of Arts

This creative thesis includes one full length play followed by a critical essay. The play is a comedy revolving around an apartment of college students who are visited by Jesus. Jesus washes their dishes, skateboards with them and otherwise accompanies them throughout their daily activities. Tom, one of the college students, is unable to see Jesus and believes that his roommates are playing a joke on him. Trying to ignore his friends' insistence that Jesus is indeed in their apartment, Tom attempts to pursue his long term crush. Things become complicated when Tom goes on a date and Jesus tags along. The critical essay that follows examines my relationship with creative writing and with my audience. The essay also attempts to explain why I chose this subject for my play.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank my husband, Chris Lewis, for his support, love, and patience. I dedicate this work to Sophia R. Lewis, my unborn child, who made this work both so necessary and so difficult.

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Characters

TOM	a university student
MAX	Tom's roommate, female
TJ	Tom's roommate, male
SETH	Tom's roommate, male
SETH#2	SETH in flashbacks
JESUS	Dressed in traditional Jesus attire. Has beard, long hair and cheerful disposition.
SAMANTHA	Tom's immediate love interest and a university student
HOMELESS MAN	Middle-aged man
JACK	a university student
WAITER	a waiter at the bar
BOY	child with a broken arm in a cast and a kite

ACT I

SCENE 1

(A four man apartment occupied by college students. The stage is divided in two. One half is the living room with two chairs and a couch. The other half of the stage is the kitchen: a table, a few chairs and a sink full of dishes. SETH is sitting on the couch doing homework. TOM walks in and sets down his bag.)

Hi Seth.

TOM

What's up.

SETH

Hey! Someone did the dishes!

TOM

Yeah.

SETH

I knew it. You broke down and did them, didn't you?

TOM

No way, man. It was TJ's turn. What's the square root of 361?

SETH

Twelve. TJ actually did the dishes? That's amazing.

TOM

No way. I don't think he even knows how.

SETH

Who did then? Max?

TOM

No, you heard her chew TJ out. No chance she would ever touch them.

SETH

Then who did them? Did TJ pay someone?

TOM

SETH

Actually it was...carry the two, seven times three is twenty-one...it was Jesus.

TOM

What?

SETH

The square root of 361 is not 12.

TOM

Jesus? Jesus, meaning the Great Redeemer of the World?

SETH

Yeah, you know, the Christmas Jesus. The one on the cross.

TOM

He just appeared in our apartment and miraculously washed the dishes?

SETH

No way, man. He knocked and came in the back door like everybody else.

TOM

Not the front door?

SETH

Are you making fun of me?

TOM

I just think you're full of it, that's all.

SETH

Sit down and I'll tell you what happened.

(TOM sits down. Starting now, SETH#2 and JESUS begin acting. SETH#2 comes and sits on top of a kitchen table, cross-legged. JESUS is not on stage yet. From now on JESUS and SETH#2 will act out the story as SETH describes unless otherwise noted.)

SETH

Dude, so this morning, I'm eating a bowl of cornflakes in the kitchen, and there's a knock at the door. I yell for them to come in and in pops Jesus.

TOM

How did you know it was him?

SETH

Well, cause he says, "Hello, I'm Jesus. I'm here to do the dishes."

(JESUS waves once at SETH#2 who waves awkwardly back. Jesus steps through the doorway into the room.)

TOM

What did you say?

SETH

Just what you'd expect. I told him that it was TJ's turn, and has been for the last week and that it really wasn't fair, you know.

TOM

Oh, of course. How stupid of me to ask.

SETH

But he's a pretty persuasive guy, so in the end, I just showed him where we keep the sponges.

TOM

And then he just did the dishes?

SETH

Pretty much.

TOM

Did he say anything else?

SETH

Uh, yeah. He asked if we had an apron. Then he rolled up his sleeves and did the pots first.

(TOM shakes his head and starts taking out his school books.)

TOM

For Pete's sake.

(pause.)

SETH

By the way, he's not the greatest at doing dishes.

TOM

Hmmm?

SETH

I mean, he gets them done but I have to say, he overdoes it.

TOM

I can't wait to hear about it.

SETH

First of all, he splashes water everywhere. I mean everywhere. So I was like, Dude, the Flood—was it just a big accident?

(At this Jesus turns around and gives SETH#2 a look, before turning back to the sink)

SETH

And you wouldn't believe the soap he used. First of all, he used a lot. A LOT. He finished the bottle. Then he asks if we have any other soap, and when I say no, he's like, "What about in the bathroom?" And suddenly he's washing our dishes with hand soap, shampoo and even the bubble bath!

TOM

Why'd he do that?

SETH

I asked that too, and he said, "I am no respecter of soaps." Boy, he got a kick out of that one. He said like three times, slopping water all over the kitchen floor.

(JESUS begins humming and then singing *Hey Jude*.)

SETH

And, he sang. The dude has a good singing voice.

(A few moment pass by with JESUS singing. It's not operatic or professional at all, it's just someone enjoying himself while he does dishes.)

SETH

I asked him if he was a Southern Baptist.

(JESUS laughs out loud.)

SETH

He has a laugh like Santa Claus. He didn't answer though.

TOM

So what happened when he finished?

SETH

Well, he wiped down the counters. Then all-formal he thanked me for my time and was about to go.

TOM

But you stopped him?

SETH

Yeah, I mean, I thought he was going to, like, give me some kind of mission or message or something. He is JESUS, you know. So I was like, 'Hey isn't there anything else?'

TOM

And?

SETH

He just looked at me, all solemn for a moment. Then he says that actually, if it wasn't too much trouble, he'd like a small glass of ginger ale.

TOM

A small one?

SETH

That's what he said.

TOM

Sure.

SETH

So I gave him his drink, which he took in one shot. Then he handed me the glass and left.

TOM

That's it?

SETH

Yeah, he just sauntered out the door, the damp hem of his robe kind of dragging behind.

(JESUS exits. SETH#2 exits soon afterward.)

TOM

That's crazy.

SETH

I know, who drinks Ginger Ale for breakfast?

(MAX enters.)

TOM

No, I mean, you're crazy. You expect me to believe that Jesus came to our apartment just to do TJ's dishes and have some soda?

SETH

Hey Max.

MAX

Hey. What's up?

SETH

Not much. It's been a slow day, y'know?

TOM

SETH!

SETH (defensively)

Look, I was just telling you who did the dishes. If you want to know why he did them you better ask him yourself.

MAX

TJ finally did the dishes? Awesome. I can finally stop using my bobby pins as silverware.

TOM

Apparently TJ didn't do the dishes. Seth says that...

MAX

Hey that's not fair. It's TJ's turn. Just because he's the baby doesn't mean we're going to do his dirty work for him.

SETH

That's what I said!

TOM

I've had about enough of what you say.

(To MAX).

Max, Seth has been trying to convince me that Jesus did the dishes.

MAX

What?

TOM

He does miracles: he heals the sick, he calms storms, raises men from the dead—he does not do dishes.

SETH

Look, why don't you quit picking on me and ask the man yourself. I've got Statistics homework to do.

MAX

Ask who? TJ?

SETH

No, Jesus.

TOM

I thought he left.

SETH

Yeah, but he forgot to take off the apron. So he brought it back, and by then TJ was awake, so they started talking. They're in TJ's room now.

MAX

What's he doing in there?

SETH

I guess they're hanging out. TJ said they have a lot of the same hobbies.

TOM

I don't believe this.

MAX

But TJ's only hobbies are miniature golfing and skateboarding.

(JESUS enters on skateboard, serenely skates across the stage and exits.)

MAX

No way!

(MAX and SETH get up and walk towards where JESUS exited. A few moments later JESUS enters on skateboard and once again

skates to the opposite side of the stage and exits.
TOM did not see JESUS and is surprised at his
roommates' behavior.)

What?
TOM

I never thought...
SETH
(Turns toward MAX and points in the direction
JESUS exited.)

I never thought of doing a hurricane grind on the bookcase!

MAX
It's like he's just part of the board. I've never seen anything like it.

What are you talking about?
TOM

MAX
Come on, Tom. You've got to admit it. That was some good boarding.

What was good boarding?
TOM

SETH
Man, didn't you see Jesus just go by? On the board?

TOM
Okay guys, cut it out. Your joke was pretty funny.

MAX
Wait, you really didn't see him? Skinny guy? Red robes? Skateboard?

TOM
Just drop it, Max. I'm going to go find TJ.

(TOM exits the same direction that JESUS
exited.)

MAX
I don't believe it. He really didn't see him.

SETH

You would think those robes would get in his way, you know? I'm gonna ask him.

(SETH goes into the kitchen to get something to eat.)

MAX

Why doesn't he see him?

SETH

(eating something)

Maybe...he's an atheist?

MAX

He's the only one of us that goes to church.

SETH

Hmmm. Muslim? Jewish?

MAX

Aren't you Jewish?

SETH

Pretty much.

(TJ enters living room followed closely by TOM and JESUS.)

TJ

Leave me alone, Tom. I'm busy this afternoon. We're going miniature golfing.

TOM

You promised I could borrow the car!

MAX

(to JESUS)

Hey.

(JESUS walks up and warmly shakes both MAX and SETH's hands.)

MAX (a bit overcome)

I know people must say this to you a lot, but... your skateboarding is awesome.

TJ

Sorry Dude. That was before the Chief showed up.

TOM

This is the first time I've asked her on a date!

MAX

A date? Who are you going on a date with?

SETH

(to JESUS)

So, uh, want some more soda?

(JESUS gestures that he wants just a little bit.
SETH gets bottle out of the fridge and pours
some more Ginger Ale for him.)

TOM

Samantha.

TJ

Wait, who's Samantha? I don't remember any Samantha.

MAX

Samantha, you moron. Samantha from chemistry who Tom's been drooling over for the whole semester.

TJ

You never said anything about her before...

MAX

Remember? Poofy hair girl? The one who won't date anyone who hasn't been saved.
Scary, religious-fanatic Samantha?

TOM

She's not scary...just nice. And her hair's not poofy.

MAX

It's like a marshmallow on her head.

SETH

I just thought she had a big head.

MAX

That's what I thought for a while, but I sit behind her in Chemistry and one day I took my pencil and burrowed down in her hair like two inches before it touched her head.

SETH

That's...weird.

TJ

Did she notice?

MAX

Well, see the thing is, the pencil got stuck, I think it was a pocket of hair gel and...

TOM

Look, I like it okay? I like her poofy hair. And I want this date to be really nice, really classy you know?

SETH

So where are you going to take her?

TOM

I haven't quite decided. It depends on if I have a car.

SETH

How about the Brig? It's new and expensive. I bet it will impress her.

TOM

No way! I'm not taking a super religious, super high class girl to a bar! She'd never go out with me again.

SETH

It's a really NICE bar. They have live music.

TOM

She probably doesn't even drink.

TJ

Weird. If you ask me, you should just cancel the whole deal. She sounds pretty boring.

MAX

That's what I think.

SETH

Where do religious girls go on dates?

TJ

(to JESUS)

You should know that one.

TOM
Well I don't.

TJ
No, I was talking to the Chief.

TOM
Wait, who's the Chief? Max?

TJ
The Chief. The washer of plates, the king of the board and, if he doesn't mind me saying so, the man with the nicest groomed beard on campus.

SETH
It is a pretty nice beard.

(JESUS smiles and shrugs modestly as they compliment him.)

TOM
"The Chief" is Jesus's nickname?

MAX
I like it. It kind of suits him.

TOM
Oh, perfect. What does Jesus have to say about my dating life?

TJ
Well he didn't comment on it, but I don't think he's impressed.

SETH
Shutup, TJ. He said that he thinks Samantha really likes miniature golf.

TOM
Oh now he knows Samantha. Of course.

MAX
Actually, that's a good idea.

TOM
Miniature golfing?

MAX
Yeah. It just sounds so...wholesome.

TJ
(to TOM)

Dude, you should come with the Chief and me! It's going to be awesome.

SETH

Cool, can I come too?

TJ

Sure. Max, you in?

MAX

No, I'm busy.

TOM

What are you doing?

MAX

I have a hot date of my own.

TOM

Really? Who are you going with?

MAX

Jack. I met him last night at Nick's.

TOM

Are you going with just him?

MAX

Yes.

TOM

Do you know anything about him other than he goes to clubs?

MAX

I know he's hot.

TJ

Here we go again.

TOM

All I'm saying is...

MAX

Don't be such a grandma, Tom! At least his hair doesn't have its own zip code.

TOM

You don't even know him. Can't you just bring someone else along? Or at least meet somewhere public this time

SETH

Max, you have to admit that the last boyfriend you had was electronically tagged by his parole officer.

MAX

I hate it when you guys do this. I'll be fine! I always am.

SETH

Why don't you just bring him golfing with us? Tom's going to do it.

TOM

Max...

MAX

(To SETH)

No thanks.

(To TOM)

Not another word, ok?

(Pause while MAX stares TOM down. He finally shrugs.)

TOM

Fine. But I'm not coming with you guys golfing. I don't want this big date to be with my roommates and their imaginary friend.

TJ

Imaginary?

SETH

Relax, he can't see him. We think he might be an atheist.

TJ

I'm an atheist.

(SETH and MAX look from him to JESUS, who has pushed himself up onto a counter top and is

mildly sipping his soda and swinging his legs back and forth.)

TJ

Sort of.

(SETH and MAX continue staring at him)

TJ

Well, I didn't know Jesus was going to be so cool.

TOM

Samantha is no ordinary girl. This date has to be something pretty amazing.

TJ

Golf's pretty amazing.

SETH

Tom, why don't you call her and tell her we're going miniature golfing and ask if she likes golf. That'd be cool.

TOM

No way!

SETH

Come on, Man. What are your options? Are you going to walk her to the movie theatre? You have no car. Face it, you're desperate.

(Pause while TOM realizes SETH is right.)

TOM

Okay fine. I'll call. But if she says yes...I'm driving.

(TOM takes out his phone and exits. JESUS moves to the living room and begins leafing through SETH's homework. After a while he begins folding paper busily.)

MAX

Ah me. Young love.

TJ

I hope she's cool with it. I'm pretty sure Tom's not going to want to miss the Chief's sweet golf swing.

MAX

TJ, he doesn't even believe the Chief is here. He can't see him.

SETH

I wonder why.

TJ

Do you think it's wickedness?

MAX

Huh?

TJ

Maybe he's just too wicked to see him.

SETH

I guess I never really thought of him as the wicked roommate. He always seemed to be the shy, good looking one. (To TJ) I always thought you were the wicked one.

TJ

No way! I'm the funny one.

MAX

The shy one, the cute one...what are you, the Backstreet Boys?

SETH

Maybe he feels bad cause he can't see him. We shouldn't bring it up if it hurts his feelings.

(TOM enters, beaming.)

TOM

She loves golf! Man, Seth that was the best idea ever. She was so...beautiful over the phone. She must be some kind of singer, her voice is so...melodious.

MAX

Tom, you are such a moron.

TJ

Say, Tom, if we were the Backstreet boys, don't you think I would be the funny one?

TOM

No way. I'm the funny one. (notices what Jesus has been doing with SETH's homework)
Hey, Seth, I didn't know you could do origami.

SETH

I can't...Hey, that's my homework!

(Jesus offers him a crane.)

SCENE 2

(A car parked in front of SAMANTHA's house. TOM is driving. JESUS is shotgun. SETH and TJ are in the backseat. TOM gets out of car and looks into the backseat.)

TOM

Okay. Now you guys remember how important this is to me, right?

TJ and SETH

Yes Tom.

(JESUS nods.)

TOM

You know how badly I want to make a good impression on this girl, right?

SETH and TJ

Yes Tom.

(JESUS nods emphatically.)

TOM

You won't bring up any crazy Jesus stories, will you?

SETH and TJ

No Tom.

(JESUS shakes his head emphatically.)

TOM

Great. How do I look?

(SETH and TJ speak at the same time.)

SETH and TJ

Good.

(JESUS lets out a wolf whistle and gives TOM a thumbs up. SETH and TJ stare at JESUS, TOM looks around.)

Who whistled?
TOM

I didn't hear anything.
SETH

Whatever. Can I have the flower?
TOM

(TJ hands him a flower through the window. TOM walks up to SAMANTHA's door and knocks. SAMANTHA answers.)

Hey Tom.
SAMANTHA

Hey. I uh, got this for you.
TOM

Thanks. It's pretty. I never got a flower for miniature golfing before. Let me go put it in water.
SAMANTHA

(SAMANTHA exits briefly. TOM turns to car and all three occupants give him a thumbs up.)

TJ
I guess she's okay-hot, if you think of the hair as an exotic hat.

SETH
Come on, man. Who looks at a girls hair? She's hot. Just look at her fine...

(JESUS leans over and honks the horn. TOM turns to look at the car.)

TOM
What the...

(SAMANTHA comes back on stage.)

Shall we go?

TOM

Sure.

SAMANTHA

(They walk to the car. TOM walks towards the passenger door. SAMANTHA begins by following him but when she sees JESUS is already in the passenger seat she angles around to a backseat door.)

TOM

I...uh I'm really glad you said you'd come with me. I was really hoping you would say yes.

SAMANTHA

Well, I was waiting for you to ask me.

TOM

Really?

SAMANTHA

Of course.

(TOM opens up the passenger door and is pretty confused when she gets in the backseat.)

TOM

Hey, Samantha, uh, you can get in the front if you like.

SAMANTHA

No, it's okay. He can keep his seat. I'm fine back here.

TOM

No, seriously, Seth and TJ are fine in the back. You can sit up here.

SAMANTHA
(a little embarrassed)

No. I couldn't do it.

TOM

You couldn't sit in the front seat?

I couldn't take Jesus's seat.

SAMANTHA

(TOM stares at her. Then stares at his roommates who have suddenly taken an interest in the car's upholstery and will not meet his eyes.)

Fine.

TOM

(TOM gets in the driver's seat and starts to drive. JESUS turns around, shakes SAMANTHA's hand vigorously and offers her an origami crane.)

Thanks, I'm doing fine. And thanks for the crane.

SAMANTHA

Do you know him?

SETH

Sort of. I mean, just from the pictures. Although, they're not the best likenesses.

SAMANTHA

Yeah, that's what I thought. He's not so photogenic, I guess. My name is Seth, and this is TJ.

SETH

Nice to meet you.

SAMANTHA

'Sup.

TJ

Okay, Samantha. Just tell me one thing.

TOM

Sure.

SAMANTHA

Have you ever spoken to any of my roommates before tonight?

TOM

No, I just barely met them.

SAMANTHA

How about Max?

TOM

Who's Max?

SAMANTHA

She's the sporty, wild one.

TJ

No, I've never met Max.

SAMANTHA

Okay. Now look over into the passenger seat and tell me if anyone is sitting there.

(SAMANTHA looks at JESUS who waves.)

SAMANTHA

Really, it's okay. I'm not upset about being in the back, I promise. I would feel weird if Jesus wasn't riding shotgun.

TOM

I can't believe this.

SAMANTHA
(to Seth and TJ)

What did I do?

SETH

He can't see him.

SAMANTHA

He can't see Jesus?

SETH

Yeah. It's been pretty awkward around the house.

SAMANTHA

But why not?

TJ

Well, we thought maybe wickedness...

TOM

HEY!

But he's not really so wicked.

TJ

But...aren't you a Christian?

SAMANTHA

No.

TJ

(SAMANTHA and SETH stare at him. JESUS hands him a crane.)

I mean, it's a label I don't appreciate. Thanks for the crane, Chief.

TJ

(JESUS gives him a small salute.)

I wasn't asking you anyway.

SAMANTHA

Sure I'm a Christian! I was baptized and everything!

TOM

This is pretty weird. Maybe he can see Jesus, and he's just in denial.

SAMANTHA

Hey, that could be it. If we just force him into some position where he can't deny the Chief is there, he'll have to see him.

SETH

But how?

TJ

I don't think you should call him the Chief. It doesn't seem right.

SAMANTHA

Maybe the Chief could trip him or something.

SETH

Yeah, maybe he could...

TJ

(JESUS who has been listening, reaches over and puts both hands over TOM's eyes. SAMANTHA, SETH and TJ start screaming.

TOM turns around in his seat, his eyes still covered.)

What's wrong guys?

TOM

SAMANTHA SETH and TJ
(yelling)

Turn around! Turn around!

TOM

Sheesh!

(TOM turns around and gradually their screams subside as they realize that TOM is driving normally.)

What is wrong with you guys?

TOM

(Silence for a moment or two.)

Okay. We're here. I hope you guys are okay.

TOM

(JESUS uncovers TOM's eyes and they all get out of the car.)

What happened back there? Did I almost hit a rabbit or something?

TOM

Something like that.

SETH
(shakily)

Samantha, you ok?

TOM

Yeah.

SAMANTHA

Okay. Let's go get tickets.

TOM

SCENE 3

(Miniature golfing green. Three holes are set up. JESUS is at one which involves a small hill, TJ and SETH are at another one and SAMANTHA and TOM are at the final one. Everyone is playing Golf but JESUS. JESUS sits on the small hill and slowly a large group of people silently surround him.)

TJ

So, I think the date's going well.

SETH

Yeah, look at them. She keeps touching his elbow and laughing when he's not funny.

TJ

Though, they're playing terrible golf...

SETH

Hey, that was kind of weird in the car, huh?

TJ

When Tom was driving blind?

SETH

No, that was pretty cool. I mean when Tom got all frustrated at us and Samantha. I hope it's not a problem for them.

(Jesus gets down off the hill and walks over to TJ and SETH and motions at them.)

SETH

No, I didn't bring any food.

TJ

Me neither. Come on, you had that big hoagie before we left.

(JESUS motions towards the crowd behind him.)

TJ

Well your friends should have brought their own food.

(JESUS motions again.)

TJ

Dude, I'm sorry. We don't have anything. Look, it's not like you're helpless, why don't you turn some rocks into food?

(JESUS stares at him, then abruptly turns on his heel and starts walking back to his green.)

SETH

Hey, wait!

(to TJ)

That wasn't cool, man.

(to JESUS)

Let's ask Tom, maybe he has something.

(JESUS and SETH walk over to TOM and SAMANTHA.)

TOM

And then the turtle said, "But that's my shell!"

(TOM and SAMANTHA laugh.)

SETH

Hey guys.

TOM

What's up?

SETH

We were wondering if you had any food on you.

TOM

Just some Starburst. Why?

SETH

The Chief says his friends are hungry.

SAMANTHA

Oh, that's too bad.

TOM

The... Chief.

SAMANTHA

Oh Tom, even if you can't see him, just give him your Starburst. At least it's something.

But he's not real!

TOM

Please, for me?

SAMANTHA

But...fine!

TOM

(TOM reaches into his pocket and pulls out a Starburst packet and hands it to SETH who in turn hands it to JESUS.)

He says thanks.

SETH

Sure he does.

TOM

(SETH and JESUS walk back to their respective holes. JESUS takes a baseball cap from one of the people in the group around his hill. He empties the Starburst packet into it and then passes it around the group. Of course the Starburst don't run out.)

So, why do you think you can't see Jesus?

SAMANTHA

Because he's not there.

TOM

You know, that reminds me of a story I read once in the Bible.

SAMANTHA

Yeah?

TOM

Yeah, it's called: Footprints in the Sand and...

SAMANTHA

Wait, I don't think that's in the Bible.

TOM

SAMANTHA

Sure it is. Anyway this man is looking over the footprints of his life, and...

TOM

Yeah, I know it. I'm pretty sure that's not in the Bible.

SAMANTHA

Look, the point is that Jesus was with him all the time, he just didn't realize it. That's just like you.

TOM

Jesus went on his dates as well?

SAMANTHA

Well, I think it's the principle of the thing.

TOM

Look, Samantha. I've been to church. I ...pray. I have no problem believing that Jesus Christ exists. I just have a hard time believing that right this second he's on green eight, eating my Starbursts!

SAMANTHA

They were for his friends.

TOM

Whatever.

SAMANTHA

You seem to get irritated very quickly. I think that might be part of the reason you can't see him.

(SETH and TJ approach TOM and SAMANTHA. The crowd around JESUS has changed a bit. It has turned into a line of sick people waiting to be blessed. Various crippled and infirm people are brought to JESUS who heals them.)

TJ

Hey, are you guys about done?

TOM

Yeah, this was the last hole. Samantha, are you up for some ice cream?

Sure, or...
SAMANTHA

Or what?
TOM

Well, have you heard of that new bar that just opened up?
SAMANTHA

What? The Brig?
TOM

Yeah, I heard it has live music.
SAMANTHA

You want to go to a bar?
TOM

I'm religious, not a prude. Besides, they have ice cream there too.
SAMANTHA

Well I guess even Jesus drank wine.
TOM

We'll find out.
SETH

(They begin to walk off stage. TJ stops and calls back to JESUS.)

Come on, Chief! We're going for ice cream now!
TJ

(JESUS's head perks up. He lifts his right hand and snaps his fingers. All the others in the line are instantly healed. JESUS lifts his robes a little to make it easier as he rushes to catch up.)

SCENE 4

(The Brig: The bar should have some tables near the proscenium, a stage with singers, and room upstage for a small dance floor. SAMANTHA, TOM, SETH, and JESUS sit at a table together, except for Jesus who recognizes someone he knows and sits with them at an adjoining table.)

TOM

Maybe we should just get some ice cream and go. I forgot that TJ was still underage.

SETH

Naw, he's fine.

SAMANTHA

He's probably having tons of fun.

TOM

He's just sitting in the car.

(TJ enters and sits at the table.)

SETH

Dude, how'd you get in? Didn't they card you?

TJ

I just told the guy I was looking for my Dad. No problem.

(WAITER approaches and everybody orders drinks. TJ orders a martini. WAITER leaves. MAX and JACK enter.)

SETH

Is that Max and her date?

TOM

Where?

SAMANTHA

Who's Max?

TJ

The sporty, wild one.

Look at her date. What a chump.

TOM

Did he just say 'chump'?

TJ

He seems alright to me.

SETH

Max is a girl? That's kind of a weird name for a girl.

SAMANTHA

Yeah, I think her name's Maxine or something.

SETH

I think it's nice. A little different, but nice. Your name's Samantha, don't people ever call you Sam?

TOM

No.

SAMANTHA

Oh.

TOM

I don't like nicknames.

SAMANTHA

Like...TJ?

TJ

Well...

SAMANTHA

Or Tom?

TJ

(brief silence)

SETH

Well, I bet you like some nicknames. For instance the Chief has a ton...

SAMANTHA

Like what? The Chief? I told you before you shouldn't call him that.

SETH

No, I mean like that song. How does it go? Oh yeah.

(sings from Handel's Messiah)

WONDERFUL!

TJ

(singing as well)

Counselor!

SETH

The Mighty God!

TJ

The Everlasting Father!

TJ and SETH together

The Prince of Peace!

(JESUS gets up when SETH says, "Wonderful" and walks over to them and give them high fives when they are through. The waiter brings drinks. JESUS picks up TJ's martini, snaps his fingers over it and hands the cup to TJ. JESUS then walks back to the other group.)

SAMANTHA

Please stop. You guys are embarrassing.

TJ

But you know we're right. The Chief does have some sweet nicknames.

SAMANTHA

Those are different.

TJ

How?

TOM

Let it go, TJ. What gets me about names is when you meet a couple and you know it's not going to work out because of their names.

SETH

What are you talking about?

TOM

Well, like...Jack and Max. It's just not going to work.

SETH (thoughtfully)

Yeah but, I think John and Maxine sound alright. And look at them, I think they look pretty great together, I think their kids would be really cute. In fact...

TOM

Shut up Seth.

(TJ takes a sip of his drink)

TJ

Hey! Hey this is water!

(SETH takes TJ's glass, and takes a sip.)

SETH

Huh. It is water. That's weird. Here, have a sip of mine.

(SETH hands his glass to TJ. JESUS snaps his fingers again. TJ takes a sip.)

TJ

This is water too!

(JESUS walks back over to the group and puts his hand on TOM'S arm and says something to him. TJ takes TOM's drink and tries a sip. JESUS snaps his fingers. SETH and SAMANTHA are staring at TOM waiting for him to respond to whatever JESUS said.)

TOM

Uhh...what?

SETH

Oh, Jesus just asked you if you want to dance.

TOM

Jesus just asked me to dance?

(Jesus speaks again.)

SETH

Not, like, with him. He says it's some sort of line dance.

TOM
(sarcastically)

Well you can just tell The Chief that I would love to dance with him, but I was just going to ask Samantha if she wanted to dance.

SAMANTHA

No thanks. I don't dance.

TOM

At all?

SAMANTHA

Yeah, it's a little too...suggestive.

TJ

Suggestive of what?

SETH

Wait, Jesus dances, but it's too wicked for you?

SAMANTHA

I didn't say it was wicked.

SETH

But that was what you meant.

(JESUS has said some other things to TOM.)

TJ

Yo, Tom. The Chief just said that since Samantha's not going to dance do you still want to come with him?

TOM (sarcastically)

Oh, come on.

SAMANTHA

Maybe you shouldn't be so rude to the Savior. He gives you so much and barely asks for anything in return.

SETH

Yeah, just a little dance of wickedness.

SAMANTHA

It's not wickedness.

SETH

Then why won't you do it?

TJ

Hey, looks like Max and Jack are going out onto the floor.

TOM

Fine. I'll come.

(JESUS, TOM, MAX and JACK go out to center stage to dance. The music should be some kind of techno. JESUS leads the dancing. It's a line dance that should kind of be Michael Jacksonish. There should be some sort of repetitive steps and JESUS should have a solo with moon-walking and other sweet moves. He shouldn't dance with a partner. TJ should be experimenting with other drinks and whenever he is about to drink JESUS should snap his fingers. SAMANTHA and SETH are pretty still, either watching the dancing or arguing about dancing. At some point SAMANTHA takes a Bible out of her purse. TOM ends up dancing next to MAX. After JESUS'S solo JESUS exits and the music is quieter.)

TOM

So, I see you brought your club boy.

MAX

Hello to you too. Have you been saved yet?

TOM

For your information, we're having a great time...except for the invisible Jesus.

MAX

He has some sweet moves. How's his golf swing?

TOM

I don't know. I can't see him.

MAX

Oh I forgot. Well, Jack and I are having a great time too.

Where is he? TOM

Oh, he went to get another drink. MAX

(The music dies and a spotlight on stage reveals JESUS with an electric guitar in front of the band. The band starts playing Hey Jude and JESUS is the lead singer.)

This is a great song. MAX

Do you want to dance? TOM

Sure. MAX

(They dance.)

So Jack's getting another drink? TOM

Mmm-hmmm. MAX

How many has he had? TOM

I don't know...maybe this is his second? MAX

I'm pretty sure it's his fourth. TOM

Have you been watching us? MAX

No. TOM

(pause)

Well, maybe, but come on Max, you don't exactly date fine, upstanding guys. You could use someone watching out for you.

MAX

Thanks so much, Dad, but for your information there's nothing wrong with the guys I date.

TOM

Yeah, nothing except they're all either bums, or drug addicts or ex-prisoners.

MAX

Yeah? Well thank you so much for your excellent advice, Tom. Really, I don't know where I'd be without you here to guide little, innocent me away from all the bad scary men.

TOM

Don't be a jerk, Max. I'm just trying to help.

MAX

If I wanted your help I'd ask for it. Seriously, Tom, what do you know about dating?

TOM

Well, I know you shouldn't be dating scum like you do.

MAX

Oh yeah, well since you're such an expert, who do you think I should date?

TOM

Well...

MAX

No, let me guess. Someone dependable, with strong moral values, and ambition. Some square who doesn't have the imagination God gave a dog...someone just like you.

TOM

Why do you have to be such a jerk about this, Max?

MAX

You just think that you're so perfect, don't you, Tom? You think if a guy's like you he's every woman's dream, don't you!

TOM

No I don't, I just think...

MAX

Well for your information, I don't want to date someone like you. I don't want a predictable, boring, ordinary guy. I like Jack!

TOM

Yeah? Well, maybe I am boring and ordinary but you should date someone like me. You know why? Because someone like me would treat you better. Someone like me would never borrow all your money, or ruin your stuff, or talk about you like you were some kind of thing. I would never do that. Never.

(Pause.)

MAX (quietly)

Guys like you don't date girls like me.

TOM

What are you talking about?

(JACK shows up carrying a beer.)

JACK
(to TOM)

Who are you?

MAX

He's nobody, Baby. Can we get out of here?

(JACK and MAX leave. TOM watches them. At this point JESUS should be singing the part that goes "Naaah nah nah nanananaaaah. nanananaaaah Hey Jude..." TOM slowly backs off the dance floor and distractedly returns to the table. SETH and SAMANTHA are still having an argument. TJ sees and TOM and approaches him with a bottle of beer.)

TJ

Tom, do me a favor. Smell this.

TOM

Okay.

TJ

What does it smell like?

TOM

Uhh, beer?

Right, now taste it.

TJ

(TOM takes a tentative drink.)

What does it taste like?

TJ

Beer?

TOM

Right. Now watch this.

TJ

(TJ takes a drink, then hands it to TOM.)

Now try it.

TJ

It's water.

TOM

Yes!

TJ

Hey, did that Jack guy seem creepy to you?

TOM

Can we focus on the beer that just violated all natural laws?

TJ

But have you noticed that Max only dates really creepy guys? Nevermind. Cool magic trick, TJ.

(TOM hands the bottle back to TJ and walks on to the table. TJ doesn't notice he's gone.)

TJ

No man, what it is, is a serious fault in the drinks here. I'm going to talk to the management. I don't know if it's a problem with the brewing, or if it something they do here in the bar, but I'm going to... (notices TOM is gone) I'm going to do something about it.

SAMANTHA

(pointing to the scriptures)

There. That proves it. Dancing leads to sin.

TOM

You guys wanna go?

SETH

Oh, now you're busting out the big guns? Well, you weren't the only Scripture Scout. Check out Ecclesiastes 3:4. For everything there is a season... Tom, read this part out loud please.

(SETH hands Bible to TOM.)

TOM

A time to mourn and a time to dance.

SETH

Booyah!

SAMANTHA

I would like to leave now. I feel like the spirit of the Lord has left.

SETH

Naw, he's just over in the corner doing the Electric Slide. Where's TJ?

TOM

Doing magic tricks or something. Why don't you go get him? Samantha and I will go pull the car around.

SETH

Okay, I'll pick up the Chief too.

(SETH leaves.)

SAMANTHA

What a pagan!

TOM

Uh, actually, I think he's Jewish.

SAMANTHA

If he doesn't believe in Jesus, he's a pagan.

TOM

Actually I'm pretty sure that Jews aren't pagan. I think pagans worship more than one god, like the Greeks or the Norse or many African tribes...

SAMANTHA

He's a pagan okay! He's a stupid, ignorant pagan!

TOM

Hey! Don't get carried away, he's a really great guy.

SAMANTHA

He doesn't understand the word of God and he mocked it by trying to interpret it. He's worse than a pharisee!

TOM

Hey! He's my friend!

SAMANTHA

Well, maybe you should choose your friends more carefully.

(TOM and SAMANTHA exit, TJ and SETH enter. JESUS follows a few steps behind.)

TJ

That manager is whacked; what a liar! I'm going to call FDA. He's ripping off all his customers!

SETH

You've got a hard life man. You want to finish off my Heineken? It's actually pretty strong.

TJ

I'll give it a try.

(They walk off stage. JESUS, following them lifts up his hand and snaps then continues off stage.)

TJ

Man!

SCENE 5

(The car again, in front of SAMANTHA's house. The seating is the same as before. TOM is in the front seat looking grumpy. JESUS has turned all the way around and is enthusiastically leading the backseat in singing Jingle Bell Rock in rounds. This goes on for a verse or so.)

Okay, we're here.

TOM

(The singing continues.)

We're here.

TOM (louder)

(JESUS silences the back seat with an official orchestral gesture. TOM gets out and opens SAMANTHA's door.)

It was nice to meet you after hearing so much about you.

SAMANTHA
(to JESUS)

Yeah, nice to meet you too, you religious freak.

SETH

I forgive you and I'll pray for you.

SAMANTHA
(to Seth)

Yo, Sam-dog. See you later.

TJ

(TOM and SAMANTHA walk up to her door.)

I wonder why he picked Jingle Bells? It makes sense that his favorite song is a Christmas carol, I just would have expected it to be Silent Night or something like that.

SAMANTHA

I don't know. Well, thanks for coming Samantha. Sorry that the guys came with me. Maybe we can try again some other time.

TOM

SAMANTHA

I don't know, Thomas.

TOM

What?

SAMANTHA

Well, I've been expecting you to ask me out for some time, after all you're nice, and smart and sometimes funny, and besides you're the best looking practicing Christian at our school.

TOM

Well, uh, thanks?

SAMANTHA

But you still can't see him, can you?

TOM

Who?

Oh Jesus? Well, uh no. No, he's still not there.

SAMANTHA

Look, my beliefs are really important to me.

TOM

Sure, mine are too.

SAMANTHA

You can't even acknowledge the existence of Christ.

TOM

Are we still talking about this? I acknowledge Christ! I just don't acknowledge that he's sitting in my car right now finishing off his peanut butter smoothie, which apparently is his favorite. To be honest, I don't even acknowledge that a peanut butter smoothie is anyone's favorite. But that doesn't mean I don't believe in Jesus, I just don't see him, that's all.

SAMANTHA

Well, I think that until you do see him, you shouldn't see me.

TOM

What?

SAMANTHA

I'm not going to lie, I like you a lot, Tom. But for me, Jesus comes first. This is hard for me, but I think that you are a spiritual challenge I just need to overcome.

TOM

Did you just call me a spiritual challenge? I don't think my faith is a problem!

SAMANTHA

It is for me. Goodbye, Thomas.

(SAMANTHA exits. TOM stares after her.)

TOM

What the freak was that?

(TOM returns to car and gets in)

TJ

Dude, what happened? Where was the goodnight kiss? Don't you have any moves?

SETH

Yeah after spending your money on that witch you should at least have gotten a little action.

TJ

Ohhhh. Probably because the Chief was watching. I wouldn't have gone jungle-wild on some girl if the Chief were there.

TOM

Just shut up.

TJ

The Chief said to tell you that he wasn't actually watching. He would never be so rude.

TOM

He can shut up too.

TJ

Whoa, easy tiger.

SETH

That was way out of line, man.

TOM

She just told me... She just said that she never wants to see me again.

TJ

Dude, I totally misread her body language.

SETH

Awesome. She was a lousy golfer.

TOM (violently)

Where is he?

(JESUS jumps.)

Where is Jesus right now?

SETH

Uh, he's still right next to you, riding shotgun.

(TOM addresses his comments to JESUS. JESUS becomes uncomfortable in the middle of his speech and crawls into the backseat. The boys make room for him. TOM continues talking to the empty front seat.)

TOM

Lots of guys have trouble dating. Some guys are too shy, some guys are annoying: you can have any number of problems that hurt your dating life.

TJ

Yeah, like really bad hygiene or weird amounts of body hair in strange places.

TOM

But me, my problem is you! Samantha said that she doesn't want to see me until I can see you. She won't date me because she thinks I'm not really Christian. Maybe she had a good time tonight, but all she can focus on is my lack of faith.

(TJ gives a low whistle.)

TJ

That's rough, man.

SETH

Man, you should be grateful. Did you really even want to date her?

TOM

No. Yes. Maybe. I did before this date. That's not the point. The point is that if I did want to date her, my chances are shot because of him. It makes me feel like crap, like I was rejected not just by her but by God.

SETH

Dude, maybe this is a sign.

TOM

A sign of what?

SETH

Maybe Jesus is trying to tell you that you have ignored him long enough and you need to realize that with him, nothing is impossible—even dating.

TOM

So what am I supposed to do? I can't see him. It's pretty obvious.

SETH

Well, maybe with our help, you can.

TOM

Great, so you guys are going to help me hallucinate so my romantic life will work out. Why does this not comfort me?

SETH

Look if you are just going to joke about this, it's never going to work.

TJ

Yeah, man. Try to have a little faith.

TOM

Aren't you an atheist?

TJ

Don't be petty.

SETH

Yeah, man. You need to grow up a bit about this.

Okay.

TOM

(Pause.)

Okay. Look, no more joking. No more games. As your friend, I need you to answer me honestly. Can you guys see him, I mean really see him?

(They nod. JESUS pats TOM sympathetically on the head.)

Come on, Tom. Who's it going to hurt?

SETH

Okay. Fine. What do you think I need to do, to see Jesus?

TOM

SCENE 6

(TOM, SETH, and TJ are sitting in the living room. JESUS is getting an apple out of the fridge.)

Okay. So go over this again.

TOM

All I'm saying is that maybe if you can have some sort of physical proof that Jesus is here, some sort of sign, then you'll be able to believe, which will let you see Jesus.

SETH

What kind of proof?

TOM

(SETH looks around room.)

Ummm....

SETH

(JESUS is about to bite into his apple.)

Perfect! Jesus, throw the apple to Tom!

SETH

(This makes JESUS a little sad, and he is about to take the bite he wanted anyway.)

SETH

No. This is more important. If Tom can catch an apple that you throw he will have to believe in you.

(to TOM)

Are you ready?

(TOM puts out his hands and concentrates in front of him.)

TOM

Yeah.

(JESUS winds up and throws the apple at TOM. It hits him in the face.)

TOM

Oww!

SETH (eagerly)

Do you see him?

TOM

No! And that hurt!

TJ (laughing)

That was awesome.

SETH

Over by the microwave?

TOM

No, I don't see him.

SETH

Ok, well, he never said it would be easy, he only said it would be worth it. Let's try something else.

(TJ has grabbed a couple apples and starts chucking them at the back of TOM's head)

TOM

Hey!

(TJ throws another apple.)

TJ

Man, Jesus. Cut that out! It's not nice.

(TOM whirls around trying to see JESUS.)

TOM

Ow, stop it!

SETH

Tom, if you are not going to concentrate I am not going to waste my time with you.

TOM

No! I'm concentrating!

(He takes another apple in the head.)

SETH

Okay. Maybe you are just looking too hard. What if...what if you close your eyes and walk around the room and just try to feel where Jesus is? I bet you can just sense his presence.

TJ

What is this hippy crap?

SETH

No, shut up, man. I once saw this show with this woman who wanted to see her dead husband and as soon as she closed her eyes she could feel where he was in the room. I swear it worked. I had goose-bumps the whole show.

TOM

Okay. Whatever. So how does it work? I just close my eyes and walk around?

SETH

No, like, there were some candles and some soft music going.

TOM

Man, we don't have any candles...

TJ

Wait. Don't worry about it. I got the next best thing. Hold on.

(TJ and JESUS exit.)

TOM

Maybe we should rearrange the furniture so I don't get hurt.

SETH

No, no man. You don't want to disrupt the spirit of the room.

TOM

The spirit of the room?

SETH

Trust me.

(TJ and JESUS enter carrying a disco ball and a stereo.)

TOM

What the...

TJ

Man, don't knock it till you've tried it.

SETH

What music did you get?

TJ

The Chief picked it.

(Lights dim slightly and TJ hooks up the disco light.)

TOM

This is weird, man.

SETH

Yeah, TJ forget the light. Turn it off.

(TJ turns off the light.)

SETH

Okay, we'll just go with the music. Tom, close your eyes and when the music starts just...just follow your heart.

(TJ snickers. TOM closes his eyes and reaches out his hands. JESUS presses play. "I Will Follow You" by Ricky Nelson begins to play. TOM runs into a lot of furniture, but it slowly becomes apparent that he is following Jesus

around. TJ is occasionally chucking apples at TOM.)

Do you sense him?

SETH

It's weird. I don't know. Maybe.

TOM

(JESUS starts barely avoiding TOM all around the stage. They are both in the kitchen when MAX enters quietly. She has a large bruise on her cheek that the audience can see. She works hard to keep the other characters from seeing the bruise by angling her face away from them. She sees TJ and SETH but does not notice TOM and JESUS.)

Yo Max. Have an apple.

TJ

(TJ tosses MAX an apple. At the same time JESUS has been moving toward MAX with TOM right behind him.)

He's so close. I feel like I could almost reach out and grab him.

TOM

(TOM does reach out to grab JESUS but JESUS quickly darts behind MAX and TOM grabs MAX instead. MAX screams as does TOM and they both jump apart. JESUS, TJ and SETH crack up.)

Sorry! I'm sorry, Max. I thought you were Jesus.

TOM

Yeah, it happens sometimes.

MAX (a little shakily)

Well, see you guys tomorrow.

(MAX starts moving towards her room off stage)

Hey wait, don't you want to hear how our night was?

TJ

Oh, uh yeah. How did it go?

MAX

AWESOME. I golf like a god!

SETH

(JESUS shoots him a look.)

It was so great.

TJ

What?

TOM

Well, parts of it were not so great.

TJ

Thank you.

TOM

Yeah, like when I hit my ball right into the gnome pond.

SETH

And?!

TOM

Oh yeah, it wasn't so great when Tom got hard-core rejected by the girl of his dreams.

TJ

Sometimes I wonder why I live with you guys. How was your scumbag-date, Max? Maybe you can cheer us up.

TOM

It was fine.

MAX

Aren't you home kind of early? Or did his parole officer give him a curfew?

TOM

Shut up, Tom.

MAX (almost crying)

Hey, hey I'm sorry. That was a joke.

TOM

(TOM gets up and walks over to MAX who is trying hard not to face him. He puts his hand on her arm and moves her to face him.)

TOM

Look, I'm a jerk. I didn't mean it and I hope you had a good... Max? Max, what happened to your face?

TJ

Ha! She was born that way!

(MAX turns to face them all and is defiant.)

MAX

I just ran into a door that's all. It's no big deal.

TOM

Why didn't you say something? I'll get you some ice.

(TOM goes to the freezer and after some searching takes out some frozen meat. SETH approaches MAX to get a look at her bruise.)

SETH

Wow, that's a bad one....Were you crying?

MAX

No. Don't be stupid.

SETH

Yeah you were. Your eyes are all red.

MAX

So what if I was? It hurts to run into a door.

SETH

You must have literally run into to it to get that bruise.

TJ

Yeah. Head-first.

MAX

Well that's what I did. Just ran right into it.

TJ

Sure you did. You're so full of crap, Max.

TOM

Hey, leave her alone. She's hurt. Here put this steak on your face.

MAX

Steak? Put it on your own stupid face.

TJ

You didn't run into any door. Unless that door was named Jack.

TOM

Jack did this to you?

MAX

No! I told you I just hit my head on the door. That's it. I'm fine. It looks worse than it is anyway.

SETH

Yeah right.

TOM

Max is that true? What happened?

MAX

Nothing! The door hit me, okay!

(Pause)

He just, had too much to drink and he got angry. It's no big deal. Everyone acts badly when they're drunk. It's not like this hasn't happened before.

SETH

Aw, Max. Man, why'd he have to...

TOM

TJ, call the police. Seth, you call the ambulance...no it'll be faster if we just drive. Max, are you hurt anywhere else?

MAX

Do NOT call the police. It's just a little bruise. And I don't need your self-righteous pity, Tom! This isn't an accident, this is my life. This is just the way my life goes, okay? I don't need another sermon about how I'm too good for this. This is what I have always gotten and what I will always get. I don't need you trying to fix what can't be fixed. Leave me alone!

(MAX runs offstage.)

SETH

Should we call the police anyway?

TJ

She won't talk to them.

TOM

This is my fault. I should have stopped her from going with that guy. I knew he was trouble from the beginning.

TJ

Has this happened before? Have you seen her with bruises before?

SETH

I don't know, I...maybe. I mean, I've seen her with bruises but she always said they were from rock climbing or something. I don't know if that was true or not.

TOM

This is all my fault.

SETH

No, man. This has nothing to do with you, and is all to do with Jack. There is no excuse for hitting a girl, and a girl like Max. I mean, she's just the nicest....

TJ

And the trashiest.

TOM

What did you say?

TJ

Come on, guys. Sure she may be great, but she looks for this kind of trouble. Look at how she acts— drinking and partying. Man, it's pretty much her own fault.

TOM

How can you say that?

SETH

TJ...

TJ

Look, I like her as much as you guys do, but face it, you wouldn't exactly wanna bring her home to meet Mom. I mean, there's a reason she goes out with trashy boys, she's that kind of girl.

SETH

Shutup TJ.

TOM

Don't you ever ever even hint that she asked to get hit. That's a lie.

TJ

But man...

TOM

She just doesn't realize that she could date anyone she wanted. She's beautiful, she's smart, she could have any guy if she wasn't so scared.

(JESUS at that moment brings in a tray with four glasses of soda on it.)

TOM

What the...! Where did this soda come from?

SETH

The Chief brought it.

TOM

The Chief? Max gets beat up and Jesus gives us Ginger Ale? What kind of sorry deal is that?

(pause)

TJ (to JESUS)

Hey. Yeah. What's the deal with that?

TOM

I'm going to go try and talk to her and then go to bed. I'll see you guys tomorrow.

SETH

Goodnight

TJ

Night

(JESUS takes TOM's untouched soda and begins drinking it.)

TJ (to JESUS)

Why don't you answer me? What's the deal?

(JESUS shrugs.)

SETH

Hey man, leave him alone, he's as upset as the rest of us.

TJ

Yeah, if he is so upset, why didn't he take better care of Max?

SETH

He was with us man, how could he know...

TJ

He's Jesus! How could he not know?

SETH

Come on, man. He didn't know. He would have stopped it if he had known. Tell him, Chief. Tell him you didn't know.

(Pause. JESUS takes another sip and looks away.)

SETH

Dude, tell him you didn't know!

TJ

He can't. He did know. He knew before it even happened.

SETH

That's not true.

TJ

He knew and you know what he chose to do? Instead of helping her, or even warning her, he just decides to go dancing. (to JESUS)What's your problem?

SETH

Is that true?

(Pause.)

Did you know all the time?

(Pause.)

Answer me!

TJ

He makes me sick.

SETH

You...you're the Savior. You're supposed to save everyone. Why didn't you save Max?

TJ

I guess clubs are just more fun, huh?

SETH

What about all those other times...what other people have you let get hurt? For goodness sakes, you went miniature golfing with us! Why would you do that? Shouldn't you be helping out with...with cholera or cancer victims or... or Africa. The whole freaking continent Africa is a disaster and you come to our apartment and skateboard with TJ!

TJ

You lousy poser. This is why I'm an atheist.

SETH (not too far away from crying)

And I really thought...I really thought you were somebody. I really thought this was going to change my life. You are just a... just a...Don't you have anything to say for yourself? Not even an apology?

(JESUS offers him a crane. SETH stands up.)

SETH

Get out! Get out of my house!

(JESUS starts clearing the glasses.)

SETH

Leave them! Leave them and get out!

(TJ grabs the tray and the glasses fall to the ground. JESUS leaves the house and TJ pushes him on the way out and slams the door. JESUS stands on the other side of the door, staring at it.)

TJ (yells)

You better never come back here.

SETH

You know, you trust a guy... you let him into your house, go golfing with him, and then...(yells) I was even thinking about getting myself saved! I was maybe converted and you pull a stunt like this!

TJ

Come on, man. Forget him, let's go to bed. Guys like him, you just gotta forget. You should be an atheist like me.

(SETH starts to exit with TJ)

SETH

I was even gonna get one of those bumper stickers that say WWJD or something.

TJ

You don't even own a car.

SETH

It was going to be an act of faith...

(TJ and SETH exit. JESUS sits down with his back leaning against the door. Looks at his wristwatch, sighs, then takes a book out from somewhere and reads it as the curtain closes. The book is "Kite-Stunts for Dummies.")

ACT II

SCENE 1

(The next morning in the apartment. JESUS is still sitting outside the door playing "Ye olde Irish rose" on a harmonica. Tom enters the living room tentatively.)

TOM

Um, Jesus?

TOM

Um. I hope I didn't wake you up but, I was wondering if, I mean since you are in my living room, if I could talk to you.

(Sits down on the sofa, but first touches the seat...he's a little worried he might accidentally sit on JESUS. Clasps his hands in front of himself and leans forward, looking down. Meanwhile, JESUS puts away his harmonica and puts his ear up against the door to hear TOM.)

TOM

Here's the thing, it's Max. She needs help. She really does. Each guy she hangs out with is worse than the last. When I saw that bruise, I mean, when I saw what he'd done to her. Man, I've never felt so bad. I mean, I've been beat up before and I never felt so bad. In fact one time I broke three bones in my leg and no one found me for an hour and I didn't feel so bad.

But that's not the point. Look, she won't listen to me, she thinks I'm patronising her...but I'm not. How could I? I mean, she's better than me. She's kinder and braver and definitely better looking...she just keeps getting involved with guys that treat her so terrible. And I'm worried that the next guy...I'm worried that it will be much worse than just bruises.

So I was just wondering, since you're Jesus, if you could help her, you know, just maybe have a talk with her about what type of guy she should hang out with.

(Pause while TOM waits a little expectantly.)

If you don't have any ideas, I was sort of thinking maybe you could throw some fire and brimstone at her. You could sort of make it seem like a commandment that she had to date nice boys. That's totally just a suggestion. I don't know. I just like her so much, and I just want her to be happy, and I know what makes her happy, but none of these guys do.

(TJ enters brushing his teeth.)

TOM

What do you think? Do you think you could help her out?

TJ

Who are you talking to?

(TOM gestures to the seat next to him)

TOM

Oh. The Chief and I were just talking.

(TJ gives a garbled and incomprehensible explanation of what happened when JESUS was kicked out.)

TOM

What the heck did you just say?

(TJ exits and returns. SETH follows close behind.)

TJ

Dude the ex-Chief's not here.

TOM

Where'd he go? Is he coming back?

TJ

Not if we can help it.

TOM

What?

SETH

Not after what he did to Max.

TOM

Wait, you let him leave?

TJ

Let him? We made him leave

SETH

This whole thing with Max is his fault.

TOM

You think he beat up Max?

SETH

I didn't want to believe it either, Tom. But look, Jesus knew that Max was going to get hurt. He knew when and how. And he didn't do a thing to stop it. He decided he'd rather go dancing instead.

TOM

Come on guys, you can't blame him for that.

SETH

He didn't deny it.

TOM

But...where'd he go?

TJ

I don't know. We just kicked him out and told him never to come back.

TOM

He could be anywhere. We've got to find him. Did you see which direction he went?

SETH

I don't think you understand, we don't want him back.

TOM

Guys, you can't just blame Jesus for this. It's not his fault. You can't just kick him out.

TJ

I don't really like your attitude, Tom.

TOM

He's not just a regular guy. He doesn't do things the same way normal people do.

SETH

You can't even see him, and all of a sudden you know him better than us?

TOM

Just because I can't see him doesn't mean I don't know about him. You don't have to see him to believe in him.

SETH

Yeah, well I have seen him and I don't believe in him.

TOM

Look, you guys just made a huge mistake. I'm gonna go find him.

TJ

Fine. But when you do, don't come back here.

(TOM opens the door and exits. JESUS scurries out of the way of the door, and then follows TOM.)

SCENE 2

(TOM and JESUS are walking on the street. A bench is somewhere on stage. JESUS is walking just behind TOM. TOM walks a few paces then stops. JESUS stops too.)

TOM

This is stupid. He could be anywhere. I'll never find him.

(Just then a handful of people cross the stage from both directions. They come singly or in pairs, as people tend to do out on the street. They all greet JESUS saying things like: "Well, hey there Jesus," or "Good to see you Chief". TOM watches them walk by, JESUS waits expectantly)

TOM

Jesus?

(JESUS waves.)

TOM

Are you really there? If so, could you send some sort of sign, not a huge earthquake or anything, but maybe a sudden flash of lightning or...

(JESUS reaches into his robes and pulls out one of the apples and throws it at TOM's head.)

TOM

Ow Okay. Great. Okay. Where to start. Let's see. Max, look, you've got to help her. I'm sorry about my roommates.

(BOY with an arm in a cast and a kite walks across stage. JESUS falls into step with him and they exit together)

TOM

They just don't understand about how you work. I mean I don't either, but at least I understand I don't understand.

(SAMANTHA walks on stage, approaches TOM)

SAMANTHA

Um. Thomas, are you okay?

TOM

No. I mean, I'm fine.

SAMANTHA

Who were you talking to?

TOM

Jesus.

SAMANTHA

Are you making fun of me? I know you can't see him.

TOM

What are you talking about? He's right here!

SAMANTHA

He's not here.

TOM

Yes he is. He was right here a second ago.

SAMANTHA

I'm afraid you can't fake true belief, Thomas. This little trick of yours is not going to make me date you.

TOM

No. I don't even want to date you. Your hair is too big. But I swear Jesus was just here. Maybe he went around the corner?

(TOM walks to other end of stage looks around hopelessly.)

SAMANTHA

My hair... I knew you weren't Christian!

TOM

Is he really not here?

SAMANTHA

We're the only two people here. And now I'm leaving.

TOM

Look, if you run into him, could you tell him I'm looking for him?

SAMANTHA

No, that's ridiculous.

TOM

What?

SAMANTHA

If you can't see him, what does it matter if he's here or not?

(SAMANTHA walks off. TOM sits down on bench. HOMELESS MAN walks up, sets down the garbage bags of stuff he's been carrying and sits down on the other end of the bench.)

TOM

Excuse me, have you seen Jesus walking around here?

(HOMELESS MAN scrutinizes him.)

HOMELESS MAN

Are you crazy? 'Cause if you're crazy, I'm can sit somewhere else.

TOM

No, I just...I'm looking for him.

HOMELESS MAN

Hmm.

(Pause.)

HOMELESS MAN

Lots of people are looking for Jesus.

TOM

You know, not so many as you'd think.

HOMELESS MAN

I've heard, the trick's not to find him, but to realize he's been there all along.

TOM

Yeah, I've heard that. What about when you know he's there and then he leaves you?

HOMELESS MAN

Jesus left you?

TOM

Yeah, he just threw an apple at my head and left.

HOMELESS MAN

Hmm

(Pause.)

You're a bit of a weird one, aren't you?

TOM

What?

HOMELESS MAN

Yeah, you're a weird one.

TOM

You're the homeless guy!

HOMELESS MAN

Well, you lost your Jesus and you're asking me for help.

(TOM turns away from him in frustration.)

HOMELESS MAN

You're wasting your time looking for him anyway. That's not going to do you any good.

TOM

Oh, so you don't believe in him?

HOMELESS MAN

I didn't say that, I just mean, he's not a guy I would go to for help, that's all.

TOM

What do you mean?

HOMELESS MAN

Let me tell you about Jesus. When I was a kid, I had a little red matchbox car, a firebird. One day I couldn't find it. I started bawling and my Mom told me to pray to Jesus and he would help me. So I prayed with all my little heart.

TOM

Yeah?

HOMELESS MAN

I never found that car.

TOM

So you don't believe in him.

HOMELESS MAN

No, I know he exists. I've seen him.

TOM

Where?

HOMELESS MAN

Down by the railroad tracks. I was a bit drunk, but I wasn't that drunk.

TOM

What was he doing?

HOMELESS MAN

He was with some kids putting pennies on the tracks. You know, so they melt when the train comes by.

TOM

Did you talk to him?

HOMELESS MAN

Not exactly.

TOM

What did you do?

HOMELESS MAN

Well I picked up the biggest rock I could find, and chucked it at his face.

TOM

You, what? Why would you do something like that?

HOMELESS MAN

Because he never gave me back my car! He never gave me my car, and I'm homeless! Don't you think someone should throw a rock in his face for that?

TOM

You shouldn't have done that, man. Did you hurt him?

HOMELESS MAN

I don't know. I took off running. You throw a rock at Jesus, who knows what's gonna get you.

TOM

You can't be angry at Jesus for stuff like that.

HOMELESS MAN

Sure you can. If not him, who else? What's he so busy doing, he couldn't help me?

(Just then JESUS runs on stage with a kite. The bench is upstage but the kite-flying goes on behind it, so HOMELESS MAN and TOM cannot see him. JESUS, obviously having a good time, throws the kite into the air. As the kite gains height, a BOY, who is holding the kite spool comes onto stage. The BOY has an arm in a cast. Both BOY and JESUS are focused on the kite. As HOMELESS MAN and TOM keep talking, JESUS takes the spool and has the kite do some cool tricks.)

TOM

Look, you can't be angry at Jesus. He doesn't work like the rest of us. I mean, he's divine. He does things for reasons that we don't understand. He does what's best for us.

HOMELESS MAN

Being homeless is best for me?

TOM

Well, maybe that's your own fault.

HOMELESS MAN

For someone who seems to know so much about Jesus, you're a bit of a jerk. Do you really think bad things happen because they are good for you, or because they're your own fault?

TOM

My friend, Max...No. No I guess I don't believe that. But I don't believe that Jesus is bad. He's good, and kind, and loves children and heals people...

(JESUS hands the spool back to the boy and gestures for him to try.)

BOY

I can't do the fancy stuff with my arm!

(JESUS takes the boy's arm out of his sling and BOY moves it around freely)

BOY

Awesome!

(BOY starts doing cool kite tricks.)

HOMELESS MAN

He does what he wants.

TOM

You don't know anything about him!

HOMELESS MAN

Yeah? Well at least I've seen him.

Let me ask you this, if you could see him, I mean, speak face to face with him, like a man might speak with his friend, would you be able to forgive him so easily?

(TOM's phone rings. He answers it. As he does so, JESUS walks up beside him and stands patiently.)

TOM

Max! How are you? Are you okay? Do you need...No, uh, actually he's not here.

HOMELESS MAN
What did you say Jesus looked like?

TOM
(to MAN)
I'm busy.
(to MAX)
No, he was here, I just lost him somehow...

HOMELESS MAN
Skinny guy? Red robes? Sandals?

TOM
What? Wait a second Max.
(To HOMELESS MAN)
What?

HOMELESS MAN
He's right next to you.

TOM
Where?

(HOMELESS MAN gestures. TOM tentatively holds out phone. JESUS takes it and starts doing those weird things that people do when they are wrapped up in a cell phone call: twirling his hair, gently kicking at the light poles or dirt clods with his feet, picking leaves off plants, etc.)

HOMELESS MAN
How come you can't see him?

TOM
I don't know. It's pretty confusing. I don't know why I can't see him. I don't know why other people can. And, I don't have any idea why he's here.

HOMELESS MAN
But you do believe that he's here right now?

TOM
On my cellphone? Yeah.

HOMELESS MAN
Why?

TOM

Well he showed up at my apartment yesterday, and the first thing he did was wash our dishes. I thought that was crazy, but the more I think about it... I mean, after thinking it over I guess it makes sense that he would do that. Probably, he would like to do all our dishes all the time. That's just the type of guy he is.

HOMELESS MAN

Yeah, well if he's that type of guy, why doesn't he...

TOM

I don't know, okay? I don't know why you are homeless. I don't know why he fixes some things and leaves some things broken Maybe...

(JESUS walks up and offers the phone to TOM.)

HOMELESS MAN

Dude, your phone.

(HOMELESS MAN motions to where the phone is. TOM makes a few unsuccessful grabs before getting the phone.)

TOM

Max!

(TOM stands up and begins talking to MAX. The audience cannot hear his conversation, he also engages in the distracted cell phone behaviors, preferably exactly the way JESUS did before. JESUS takes his place on the bench.)

HOMELESS MAN

What's up.

(JESUS shrugs.)

HOMELESS MAN

So, uh, sorry about the rock.

(JESUS nods.)

HOMELESS MAN

I just really loved that car, you know?

(JESUS nods. TOM finishes conversation and comes back and sits on the bench again. JESUS scoots over just in time not to get sat on.)

It's crazy.
TOM

(Pause.)

HOMELESS MAN
What in particular about this conversation are you referring to? Because I could name a few things...

Look, you see Jesus, don't you?
TOM

Yeah.
HOMELESS MAN

Okay, I'm going to talk to him. Just tell me what he says.
TOM

(TOM begins addressing the space where he thinks JESUS is. On his other side, JESUS and HOMELESS MAN watch him.)

What did Max tell you?
TOM

(HOMELESS MAN looks at JESUS who shrugs.)

HOMELESS MAN
He says he can't violate the supplicant-deity confidentiality of prayer.

It was a phone call!
TOM

He said, "That's just how I roll."
HOMELESS MAN

(TOM makes a frustrated noise.)

So, uh, what's going on?
HOMELESS MAN

TOM

My friend Max is going to have a meeting with Jesus. I'm not allowed to come, but I'm supposed to bring him back to the apartment so he doesn't get lost. Why can't I come?

HOMELESS MAN

He says he works in mysterious ways.

TOM

And what about Seth and TJ? They are set to beat you up as soon as you go back in there. What are you going to do about them?

HOMELESS MAN

He says he's taken a few kickboxing courses in his day. I think that was a joke.

TOM

Well, what am I supposed to think? Why can't you have a meeting with me? Why can't I see you?

HOMELESS MAN

He says that maybe you should get going. Max will be waiting.

TOM

Fine!

(gets up)

You better come too.

HOMELESS MAN

No, I'm fine here without your craziness.

TOM

I'll buy you breakfast.

HOMELESS MAN

Let's go.

(HOMELESS MAN lifts a couple garbage bags onto his shoulders and stands up and walks with JESUS and TOM back to the apartment.)

TOM

He still here?

HOMELESS MAN

Yeah.

TOM

Ok. We're here. Just don't upset her more okay? And watch out for the guys. They're nice but they can be really tough.

(JESUS stands in front of him.)

HOMELESS MAN

He asks if it really matters.

TOM

What?

HOMELESS MAN

That you can't see or hear him. Does it matter?

TOM

What? Of course it matters. I've studied about him all my life, and I mean I don't want to sound corny or anything, but I really do try and act like he would act and he's here and I can't even see him. What's wrong with me?

HOMELESS MAN

Um Jesus just asked me, who sinned you or your parents that caused you to be blind.

(to JESUS)

I don't know. Him?

TOM

I'm not the wicked one! And my parents are just fine!

HOMELESS MAN

He says if you know that, then it's not important to see him.

(JESUS starts to exit then returns.)

He says thanks for the miniature golfing and the ginger ale.

TOM

What the...

(JESUS pulls a red car out of his robes and gives it to HOMELESS MAN.)

HOMELESS MAN

Is this supposed to make me feel better?

(JESUS shrugs.)

Well, it does.

HOMELESS MAN

(JESUS exits)

Ask him just one more thing for me...

TOM

He's gone.

HOMELESS MAN

Man....

TOM

McDonald's has a good breakfast...

HOMELESS MAN

Yeah, let's go.

TOM

SCENE 3

(In a McDonald's. HOMELESS MAN and TOM are sitting at a table. They have finished eating and are talking.)

So anyway, that's all that's happened since Jesus appeared.

TOM

The thing that gets me is ginger ale for breakfast. Who does that?

HOMELESS MAN

What do you think about what my roommates said. I mean, do you still think he's a jerk?

TOM

Well, you have to admit he does some lousy things. A lot of them.

HOMELESS MAN

But do you think he's a jerk?

TOM

HOMELESS MAN

Look. I saw Jesus today and all I got out of it was a red plastic car. I'm still homeless. Let's just say, I would never have him over for dinner.

TOM

Hey, I can't wait any longer. I'm gonna go find out what's going on.

HOMELESS MAN

See ya, weirdo.

(TOM starts to leave then turns around.)

TOM

Hey, uh...you don't need any help do you?

HOMELESS MAN

Me? Naw. I'm totally fine.

TOM

Yeah, that's what I thought. I'll see ya then.

(TOM starts to leave.)

HOMELESS MAN

Yeah, come see me sometime. I'll be in the park all winter.

(TOM stops and turns around.)

TOM

Man...

HOMELESS MAN

What do you mean "do I need any help?" I'm HOMELESS.

TOM

Well what am I supposed to do about it? I'm not, like, a Social Worker or anything.

HOMELESS MAN (sarcastically)

Oh, I've got an idea. Why don't you give me a little toy car and then I can have races on the bench that also doubles as my bed!

TOM

What should I do?

Give me your credit card. HOMELESS MAN

Yeah right! TOM

Debit card? HOMELESS MAN

No! TOM

How much cash do you have on you? HOMELESS MAN

Ummmm. TOM
(searches his pockets)

Twenty bucks.

Give it here. HOMELESS MAN
(TOM gives him the money.)

And your cell phone. HOMELESS MAN

Hey! TOM

Well, ya can't blame a guy for trying. HOMELESS MAN
(HOMELESS MAN gets up and starts to exit.)

See ya, sucker. HOMELESS MAN
(TOM watches him.)

Hey. Wait a minute. TOM

It's mine! You gave it to me fair and square. HOMELESS MAN

TOM

No, you're right, it's yours. Look, where are you going now?

HOMELESS MAN

What do you care?

TOM

(Wishing he was not saying what he is about to say.)

Look, maybe you should...

HOMELESS MAN

Yeah?

TOM

Well, I was just thinking that, um well, you wanna come and crash at my place for a while?

HOMELESS MAN

You're crazy and your roommates are all crazy. Why would I want to do that?

TOM

We have indoor heating.

HOMELESS MAN

Fine. Can I have another burger?

SCENE 4

(TOM and HOMELESS MAN walk into the apartment kitchen. SETH is sitting on the sofa doing homework.)

TOM

Where is everyone?

SETH

Hold on. What's the square root of...

TOM

Seth! Where's Max? Where's Jesus?

(HOMELESS GUY moves to the fridge and starts rummaging through it.)

SETH

Oh, right. Well, I think Max is in her room, and Jesus left.

TOM

What did you do to him?

SETH

Nothing, he just left.

TOM

What happened? Did he talk to Max? Did TJ punch him? Where is TJ?

(SETH notices HOMELESS MAN.)

SETH

Hey! Isn't he the homeless guy from the park?

TOM

Yeah. Look I'll tell you about him later. Tell me what happened.

SETH

Did he bring in those trash bags with him?

TOM

Yeah, look Seth, he's cool. He's just going to stick around here for a couple days.

SETH

What!

TOM

Don't worry. He'll be in my room and he'll only touch my stuff.

SETH

Is he going to take a bath? Because if he is he better disinfect the tub afterwards. And he better only use your soap! None of the bubble bath.

TOM

Fine. Just my soap.

HOMELESS MAN

I don't have a toothbrush. Can I use your toothbrush?

TOM

We'll get you a toothbrush. Dude, you can have anything in there with a T on it. But not if it has a T and a J. Just a T...

SETH (to Tom)

Does he know the difference between T and J?

TOM

Look. He's fine. Shut up about it. Where's Max?

(SETH gets up and goes into the kitchen.)

SETH

HEY! That's an S on the box of Corndogs. An S!

TOM

Seth!

SETH

Fine, I'll tell you what happened.

(At this point SETH #2 comes on stage and sits where SETH was.)

SETH

I was sitting on the sofa and Max and TJ were with me.

(MAX and TJ enter stage. MAX sits down and TJ paces.)

And we're all ticked off at Jesus. Even Max is angry at him after we talked to her. That's why she called you, so we could all tell Jesus a thing or two.

TOM

Oh no!

SETH

So, to be honest when he walked in the door we were all ready to jump him. Not really. Well, maybe TJ was.

(JESUS enters.)

SETH

But he says, wait, I have a message from Tom.

TOM

What?

SETH

So we are like, okay let's hear the message. And he's like, I need some props.

TOM

What message?

SETH

I don't really know why we listened to him, but I guess he is Jesus. So we got him what he asked for.

(TJ, SETH#2 and MAX assemble a pile in front of JESUS of lighter fluid, matches, a mirror, a stereo, and pan lids)

SETH

So then he says, it's for MAX. And he takes out these dolls, and by the way, one looked a lot like Max.

TOM

Dolls?

SETH

Yeah, and he says something like...I mean he used nice language and stuff but essentially he said, "Max this doll is you. This is how you'll feel if you keep dating guys like Jack." And then he lit the match and the lights went low and the doll was on fire! And it was just like Hell, man!

(The doll burns while JESUS crashes together the pot pan lids and the disco ball is on.)

There was even this freaky music.

(The theme from Phantom of the Opera plays briefly.)

TOM

Wow. I guess that's what the smell is.

HOMELESS MAN

Awesome.

SETH

Then everything went back to normal and Jesus puts out the Max doll and he shows it to Max. Man, you should have seen her, her eyes were so big. And then he says “Max this is how you see yourself.” And then he busts out this mirror and says, “but look, this is how I see you.”

And personally, I wouldn't have done that, because, to be honest, Max looked like trash right then, with her having the bruise and not having showered and everything. But she looked in the mirror and did this weird laughing and crying thing at the same time.

And then he says, “Tom also sees you this way. You should date someone like him.”

(MAX stands up and gives JESUS a hug then exits.)

TOM

What'd she say?

SETH

She just kept bawling and left.

TOM

Is she here now?

SETH

Yeah, in her room I think.

TOM

So then Jesus left?

SETH

Well, he stayed and played Halo for a while, but then I said I should do my homework so he said he had stuff to do too, so goodbye.

(All characters except SETH and TOM and HOMELESS MAN exit.)

TOM

I'm going to talk to Max.

(TOM exits. Pause while SETH watches as HOMELESS MAN drinks from a gallon of milk that has a very clear S on it. HOMELESS MAN wipes his mouth.)

HOMELESS MAN

Hey, what about you? Are you still angry at him?

SETH

Tom?

HOMELESS MAN

Naw the other one.

SETH

Jesus?

HOMELESS MAN

Yeah.

SETH

Yeah. Well...no...kind of.

HOMELESS MAN

Let me ask you this; would you ever invite him over for dinner?

SETH

Maybe. If he did the dishes.

(The End)

AFTERWORD

The Difference between Social Work and Creative Writing

Or

Anna Lewis Meets Her Audience

The girl sat on the other end of the couch from me, facing forward and staring at the wall. She chewed her lip as she pulled her long sleeves down over her hands. She might have saved herself the trouble; I had already seen the long scratches on her wrists earlier today. That's why I asked her to come talk to me.

“So, uh, what do you want to talk about?” she asked.

I had worked at the eating disorder clinic for almost four months, and confronting girls about self-harm was a regular part of my week. My role in the process was clear: discover the harm, confront the girls, deliver consequences, and finally report the harm to the psychologists—still it was different and difficult each time. This girl in particular posed a problem. To come down too hard on her was to ruin the trust I had built up with her over the last few weeks. Until yesterday she had been making progress at the center. I didn't want to shove my authority in her face and alienate her.

I considered confronting her immediately, and quickly rejected the thought. She was too frightened and too fragile. It would be better to get her to confess on her own. This, of course, would be hard. I was about to open our conversation with a phrase right out of a Social Work textbook: “So Lucy, I noticed that you've seemed a little tense today. How are things going?” But I stopped myself. She was too clever for that. We would be talking in circles all evening. Instead, I took a deep breath and reviewed

everything I knew about her. I considered what she had brought with her when she came to the center, what she talked to the other girls about, what she drew during art therapy—anything I could think of. I decided to take the long shot.

“Lucy, I was wondering what kind of music you listen to.”

“What?” This was not what she had expected.

“Yeah. I didn’t recognize any of the CD’s you brought with you. What kind of stuff do you listen to?”

“Well...” She gave me a quick, penetrating look then said, “Have you ever heard of Rammstein?”

I hadn’t, but I asked what other bands they were like. She began to speak of her music. At first it was slow and awkward; after all, it was and always is a difficult process to move someone from defensive to relaxed. We talked about nothing but music for about fifteen minutes. I asked her what she thought about the latest songs on the radio and she put a hand to her face in disgust. I saw a ragged, red mark on her left wrist but I ignored it.

Although I pretended to be as wrapped up in the conversation as she was, I weighed each word carefully before I said it. A wrong phrase or intonation could send her back into a defensive state. I asked her what she listened to when she was happy and she told me. I asked her what she listened to when she was sad and she told me. I asked her what she listened to today and she told me. I asked her why she had listened to that song. Well, it had been a hard day. Hard in what way? Well, she’d been remembering some things about her dad...

I don’t know how we did it exactly— but somehow, with just words and good intentions I had crossed over from being an enemy to another human who might

understand. A minute later she shoved up her sleeves to her elbows and pushed her badly scratched arms in my direction, the way a child might show a scraped elbow to a parent to be kissed better. She told me, fully expecting I would understand, how her day had become so bad that cutting herself had seemed the only answer. And I understood.

Later, as I wrote up a report, I considered our moment of connection. It reminded me of reading J.D. Salinger's "Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters." In the story, a boy named Seymour purposefully throws a rock at a little girl's face. She ends up needing nine stitches and carrying the scar the rest of her life. His only explanation was that "she looked so beautiful sitting there in the middle of the driveway with Boo-Boo's cat" (104). Obviously, this is an unacceptable reason to hurt someone; however, by the time I read up to this part of the book I had developed such a relationship with the story that not only did I understand why Seymour had thrown the rock, I might even have done the same if I had been him. I'm talking about that transcendent moment where you can understand something beyond your experience, where the mystery of another person is plainly open to your view.

I thought all this with my report in front of me. I wrote my last few sentences happily and thought, "This is how I can be both a social worker and a writer. Essentially we do the same thing: we reach people. In social work we call them patients; in writing we call them audience."

Walter Benjamin stated: "Only in rare instances is lyric poetry in rapport with the experience of its readers" (110).

“Look at this!” I shoved a paper in my classmate’s face. It was my first semester as an English Master’s student. I had come across some essays by Dana Gioia and was panicking. My classmate was not particularly concerned so I pointed to one of the most alarming lines that read, “[poetry] has virtually no audience outside the university” (par.9). To me this seemed the greatest literary catastrophe imaginable. No respectable social worker could ever turn poet without an audience!

My peers were disappointed. “Of course poetry has no audience. Short stories have no audience. Most creative writing has no audience. Everyone knows that. If you want to be rich and famous, Anna, switch genres, maybe even programs.”

“I don’t care about being rich and famous! That’s not the point! How can anyone be content with an audience made up entirely of academics?”

My classmates were offended, and with good reason. It sounded like I was saying that readers such as themselves were not worth writing for. However, when considered from a social work perspective my complaint makes more sense. What if a social worker studied counseling for years and was then told he or she would only be able to treat other social workers, or worse, social work professors. All the social worker’s training was to treat an artificial or nonexistent patient.

For me, the problem of audience is not a problem of economics (who will pay me?!) or a problem of fame (I want my name on a t-shirt!). Instead it is a problem of being able to write at all. To counsel, you need a patient with a problem. You don’t even know how to start counseling until you see their face. To be a writer you need an audience.

“Poets arguing about modern poetry: jackals snarling over a dried-up well”
(Connely 25).

Dana Gioia states that poetry, “no longer part of the mainstream of artistic and intellectual life...has become the specialized occupation of a relatively small and isolated group” (par. 1). This isolated group is academia. With the emergence of modernism, poetry lost its audience of educated people and only managed to hold on to the other poets and English faculty.

While poets and university professors (mostly merged into one) have managed to keep poetry alive, they have only been able to do so within their own circles. Rarely do poems escape into the general public. Where well-circulated journals used to contain poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, now most contain only the latter two. When I speak to brilliant students or professors from other disciplines, or even when I speak to other English students and it comes up that I write poetry, an uncomfortable expression passes over their faces and too often they say, “Poetry? You know, I never really get that stuff.”

Of course there are exceptions. Billy Collins defined his tenure as Poet Laureate by creating Poetry 180, a program designed to reintegrate poetry into the high school classroom and from there, hopefully, modern culture. In a 2001 interview Collins stated “I do find much contemporary poetry incomprehensible, and I don’t expect readers to flock to poems that they can’t understand” (Stainburn 11). Collins has put a great deal of effort into broadening the audience for poetry. He playfully condemns and mocks poems that are inaccessible to readers.

Dana Gioia, who may at first seem to be poetry's harshest critic, echoes Collins's call for a poetic revolution. In fact, Gioia's sharp criticism of the state of poetry results from his great love of poetry and all art. Gioia is one of poetry's greatest advocates. His books, essays and speeches are given not as an epitaph to poetry but rather as a rallying war cry. He tries to raise the alarm to get a response both from the poets and their estranged audiences. In a 2007 commencement speech at Stanford Gioia plead with America to reconcile itself to its cultural heritage in the arts telling the graduates that the difference between active and passive citizens "depends on whether or not they read for pleasure and participate in the arts" (Gioia to Graduates) . As the Chairperson of the National Endowment for the Arts, Gioia has spent much effort into trying to bridge the gap between audience and artist.

Gioia and Collins have had undeniable effects on the state of poetry. Collins's humorous and accessible style has increased his own personal audience to movie-star status as far as poetry is concerned. He's sold more than 250,000 copies of his books and his poetry readings invariably sell out (Geier 1). No one can say Billy Collins does not have an audience.

Gioia's essays criticizing poetry's decline have incensed and intrigued other poets and critics to the point that when his essay "Can Poetry Matter?" was published in the *Atlantic Monthly* the journal "received more responses on this essay than on any piece in recent history" (Gioia 1). Intriguing and irritating poets and critics alike, his essays forces poets to reevaluate their relationship with their audiences. Gioia revived and refuses to let die the claim that poets are estranged from their audiences and both parties need to make amends.

There are great writers and critics today who are attempting change the state of poetry. They are altering it, but even the greatest proponents admit the move is slow. Last year Gioia stated:

In a time of social progress and economic prosperity, why have we experienced this colossal cultural and political decline? There are several reasons, but I must risk offending many friends and colleagues by saying that surely artists and intellectuals are partly to blame. Most American artists, intellectuals, and academics have lost their ability to converse with the rest of society. We have become wonderfully expert in talking to one another, but we have become almost invisible and inaudible in the general culture. (Gioia to Graduates)

There is a movement, not only limited to Gioia and Collins, intent on reviving poetry. However, it is still in process and may or may not succeed. Poetry today still lacks a general audience and is mostly read by academia, which to me and my social work background equates to having no audience at all. Professors, poets, students—these are colleagues. There is satisfaction in sharing your work with a colleague, but you don't work for them.

How do you write a first sentence, a first word, a first letter without having a legitimate reader? Tennessee Williams says, "Personal lyricism is the outcry of prisoner to prisoner from the cell in solitary where each is confined for the duration of his life" (3). If Dana Gioia, Christopher Beach, Edmund Wilson, Joseph Epstein and all my peers are

right, then I as a poet am expected to make that outcry knowing full well that there is no one within earshot. This sounds pointless.

Emmanuel Levinas, in his explication of our responsibility to the other, states, “the face orders and ordains me” (97). Here Levinas uses the famous metaphor of the face to claim that it is only because of the existence of another being that anyone has any direction or meaning at all. Martin Buber echoes this claim, stating, “The world as experience belongs to the basic world of I-It. The basic word I-You establishes the world of relation” (56). He claims that the very existence of others requires man to define himself, not through the nature of existence or the whys of the universe, but instead in the immediacy of the presence of the other. Knowledge is not found in contemplations of one’s nature but in interaction with the other.

Levinas goes on to state that one’s interaction with the other includes responsibility: “If I am alone with the other, I owe him everything” (90). This is not required to be mutual: “I am responsible for the other without waiting for reciprocity” (98). Obviously, he was not speaking directly to poets about poetry or to social workers about social work, but he certainly does not exclude them.

If a social work degree did require one to read Levinas and Buber (and frankly I think it should), these two men would be instant heroes. The entire field of social work is a response to the other. Knowing this, and knowing that I had left the world of social work for academia, I found myself in the uncomfortable position of trying to answer for myself, WWLD? What would Levinas do?

I turned in my resignation at the eating disorder clinic two weeks before graduate school started. My last day at the clinic, one of the girls asked me the following question: “Do you really believe that you will be doing anything as a writer that is more important than what you are doing here?”

I told my husband I was considering leaving the master’s program. As a preliminary step in that direction, I read more Levinas. It was at this point that I began to redefine my idea of audience.

Levinas does not speak of faces. He speaks in the singular not the plural. It is the face of the individual that he is concerned with, not the faces of the needy. This is an important distinction. The responsibility that Levinas illuminates for us is not fulfilled by the number of faces that we respond to, or the number of faces in our audience. His claim is not that we gain meaning from and are required to serve humanity. It is that we gain meaning from and are required to serve the other. The one.

I thought about this for a few days.

Is this possible? Is it fair to write your whole life for only one person? I am unsure. What if a social worker spent her whole life treating only one person? Is it worth it? I think it is. The number of people you reach doesn’t matter as much as the reach. If this is the case, I don’t need to worry about the small number of people reading poetry. I could spend my whole life writing all my poetry to one person. If there was only one person in the world who read poetry, I could still respond to him or her.

With this in mind I reevaluated the question I had been asking myself. No longer was I asking, who are my audience members? My new questions, was and is: Who is my audience of one?

I went back to the graduate students and asked them who they wrote for.

“Audience?” The girl looked at me and slowly shook her head. “Hmm, I never really thought about it before. I guess I don’t have one.”

I posed the question to other writers in the program.

“Well, I guess I just write to myself. I try to write things I would like to read.”

“I write to editors.”

“I used to write to God, but I don’t think he likes my stuff anymore.”

I tried to write a poem when my brother, Tom, got married. I wanted it to be a gift so I tried to keep him in mind as I wrote it. I ran into a bit of trouble when I realized I wanted to write the poem in free verse. My brother only likes poetry in form. I tried to force the poem into a rhyme scheme but... finally just decided to write to someone *like* my brother who *did* like free verse. I was in the middle of a really terrific stanza when I realized that I was using language that my brother would not be comfortable with, and would not understand. I hesitated. Should I omit the stanza? Instead I once again changed the focus from Tom to a Tomish person.

By the time I finished the poem the audience was not Tom at all. I ended up buying him a waffle-iron.

At times poets write poems to or about their audiences. I approached these examples warily, hoping I would not mistake the use of second person in a poem to mean a reference to the audience, when the poet only meant it as a literary device. In his poem "Selecting a Reader," Ted Kooser describes his ideal reader.

First, I would have her be beautiful,
and walking carefully up on my poetry
at the loneliest moment of an afternoon,
her hair still damp at the neck
from washing it. She should be wearing
a raincoat, an old one, dirty
from not having money enough for the cleaners.
She will take out her glasses, and there
in the bookstore, she will thumb
over my poems, then put the book back
up on its shelf. She will say to herself,
"For that kind of money, I can get
my raincoat cleaned." And she will. (3)

The reader that he selected, whom we assume to mean his audience, has been identified so specifically that we know not only her gender, socio-economic class and her mood, but even the clothes she wears. Of key importance though is that this carefully outlined woman is not real. Kooser lets us know that this delightful woman he writes to

does not exist in his first line. He doesn't state "She *is* beautiful," but instead that he would "have her be beautiful." Despite his specificity, his reader is imagined.

Billy Collins frequently addresses his reader in his poems. In his poem, "Dear Reader," Collins characterizes his reader as both incredibly similar to himself and yet unknowable. He calls his reader, "my echo, my twin" and an "attentive ghost, dark silent figure standing/ in the doorway of these words"(3).

Collins' reader is different than Kooser's. Instead of the lovely, quirky, practical girl, he describes a mysterious, haunting, sexless figure, akin to a ghost. What these descriptions have in common is that both are imagined. Neither reader is real. Collins, through his dark description, touches on the obscurity and uncertainty of this mystery-reader.

When he was asked in an interview who he was speaking to in his poems, Collins replied:

I'm speaking to someone I'm trying to get to fall in love with me. I'm trying to speak intimately to one person. That should be clear. I'm not speaking to an audience. I'm not writing for the podium. I'm just writing, trying to write in a fairly quiet tone to one other reader who is by herself, or himself, and I'm trying to interrupt some silence in their life, which is utterance. I don't really have a picture of this person. (Whitney par. 9)

Both Collins and Kooser identify their audiences as composed of one individual. Both also include romance in their descriptions of their reader. Kooser does this by having his reader be female and beautiful; Collins does this by stating he is trying to convince his reader to fall in love with him. Their purpose is to suggest that you must approach a

reader with the same sort of trepidation you might approach a new love. You want them to like you...but you don't know who they are.

Carl Dennis suggests that “perhaps the best way for writers to address an audience that is both immediate and open is to imagine a single person endowed with unrestricted powers of sympathy and discrimination” (12-13). He explains that to write to a general audience is too vague, but to write for a specific audience of identifiable people is likely to come off “parochial” (12). Ralph Waldo Emerson referred to this imagined audience as “the unknown friend,” one sympathetic but mysterious other. In this way my audience is not the small group of academics that still read poetry, it is not my brother or anyone I know, but instead a construct of my own imagination. I write a fiction to a fiction.

I balk at this. This is worse than writing to academia. The act of writing seems just an exercise, the acrobatics of a mind that could be better used responding to alterity. I refuse to write to no one because that means it is for no reason. But before I tell my husband that this time I'm serious about switching programs, I come across an article written by Walter Ong.

Ong's stance on the issue is clearly explained by the title of the article, “The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction.” He claims that of course the audience is fictitious. Always has been, always will be. He explains why:

The person to whom the writer addresses himself normally is not present at all. Moreover, with certain special exceptions such as those just suggested, he must not be present. I am writing a book which will be read by thousands, or so I modestly hope, by tens of thousands. So, please, get

out of the room. I want to be alone. Writing normally calls for some kind of withdrawal. (10)

Because writing is a solitary activity, writers do not interact with their audiences in real time. Even if they had a specific person in mind as they wrote—for example if they were to write a letter—the audience would still be fictive. The writer imagines the reader in a particular mood which may not be the case, or having particular interest in what the writer has to say, which at that moment may not be true. In an oral conversation, the mood and interests of the reader are ascertained through dialogue. In the reader/author relationship the moods and interests are invented.

Ong states that even if you attempt to keep a journal and write to yourself, the audience is still fictive. At first this appears strange. It would seem that writing to yourself would allow you to be in the same room with your audience for the first time. However, this is not the case. Instead the writer formulates a fictive self, which could be any number of possible selves, ranging from the self he would like to be, the self as he thinks other people see him, the ideal self twenty years from now, or even his own constructed version of his present self. All are fictive. Consider the writer who addresses himself to “Dear Diary.” Who in the world is “Dear Diary”? His posterity? An anthropomorphized book? Either way, Ong argues, “the diary, which at first blush would seem to fictionalize the reader least...probably fictionalizes him or her the most” (20).

The question this presents is how do you ever actually reach your audience if your audience is not real? The answer, says Ong, is that in order for an audience to read your writing they must become a fiction themselves. Return to the idea of letter writing for a moment. According to Ong, all letters are written to fictive audiences; however, they are

understood by real people. This is possible because even as the writer assigns an imaginary reader to his work, the reader suspends his own self and becomes the fictional audience the writer demands. Through reading, the readers put aside their own egos and try on the perspectives, the ideals, and the values of the writer. In essence, “the process of imagining a reader is not an attempt to approximate the knowledge and viewpoint of actual persons but a process of projection of self that the readers will try on and find agreeable” (Dillon 163-164). The fictive nature of the reader/writer relationship is not only unavoidable, it also is crucial to communication.

Rainer Maria Rilke, in his poem, “*The Reader*,” supports the idea that the only way to reach a reader is to create a fictive location for the reader in the writing. The first stanza reads: “Who knows him, this one, whose own face/ sinks away out of its being into a second one,/ that only the quick turning of whole pages/ sometimes forcibly interrupts?”(par. 1). Here, Rilke addresses the mystery of the reader as a constantly changing face. The only way to still the face, to keep it from fading into obscurity, is to expose it to “the quick turning of pages,” that is, the construction of a book, which demands that the face be still. The face doesn’t change, because in order to read the book, the reader must fit himself into the predetermined fiction that the author has already constructed for the reader. As soon as the reader disengages himself from the book, “his features, ordered as they were/ remain now forever rearranged” (par 1). The other, released from the fictive contract of the book, becomes once more unknowable.

This throws a whole new light on the connection between serving the other and writing. The goal, instead of slanting your writing to a particular person, is to write it to an ideal person. Emerson’s unknown friend has to be

unknown because he or she must be more sensitive and open than a specific person. It is ridiculous to try to write to the other because you will always fail; the other is forever unknown. Instead of trying to reach the unknowable, you create a plane of fiction, using your words not to enter into the other's mind, but to invite the other to join you. And then once you and your reader are there, both of you immersed in fiction, a real conversation can start. This fictive plane is where poetry becomes what Salvatore Quasimodo defines as "the revelation of a feeling that the poet believes to be interior and personal which the reader recognizes as his own" (par 16).

Finally I am comforted and temporarily at peace with writing—which is good because to abandon writing before your thesis is to be defended makes for an awkward defense. I like the idea of the text being a liminal space, where my audience and I can put aside our differences and finally understand each other, even if it's only for a moment.

Part II

Writing about Jesus:

An Entirely Different Problem with Audience

When I was about eight I had a dream about the war in heaven—the war where Michael and his angels cast out Satan. It was obviously a byproduct of some Sunday school lesson, except, in my dream, it wasn't so much a war as it was a baseball game. No swords or guns or broken beer bottles—not even a Fantasia-like exchange of colored lightning bolts. It was an outdoor baseball game and I was the catcher. I had the mask, the pads and the funny-looking catcher's mitt. Satan, who other than being abnormally tall seemed like a perfectly normal guy, was up to bat. What I remember from my dream

begins with Satan tapping the dirt out of his spikes, and me starting to shake. I remember I was terrified.

The thing was, I wasn't scared because Satan was three feet away from me holding a baseball bat. I was frightened because on the mound God was pitching. I knew I was supposed to catch the ball when he pitched, and I just knew that he was going to knock my head off. Even as an eight year old I was sure that I did not want to get in the way of God's fast ball.

I started to cry, positive I was going to die. A timeout was called and God motioned me to the pitcher's mound. In the infield Jesus, as shortstop, gave me a thumbs up. When I got to the mound, God crouched down, put his arm around me and told me not to worry about the pitch. All I was supposed to do, he said, was keep my left hand open and he would land that ball in my mitt, real sweet and gentle.

That's all I remember. I still think about it a lot; it's my best dream. It easily reflects how I felt about divine beings as a kid. I liked the idea of a more familiar Godhead. God was not just someone I could pray to, but someone who might buy me a corn dog after the game. I started thinking a lot about God and Jesus after that dream. In school I wondered what Jesus's favorite color was, and wondered if he liked grape bubble-tape as much as I did. I once got a beautiful, white sweatshirt covered with plastic jewels and poofy-paint and I remember thinking: "I bet Jesus would love a sweatshirt just like this!"

Robert Detweiler, a professor of American History, states: "The beginnings of American fiction [...] are intimately related to the story of Christ" (8). This is easily

illustrated by examining the two most popular novels in nineteenth century America—*Ben Hur*, by Lew Wallace, and *In His Steps*, by Charles Sheldon. Both cast Jesus as central character in their plots, and their success was due, at least partly, to that inclusion (Allit1). At that time period, at least for the everyday American, novels still had bad reputations: they were considered immoral because of their emphasis on seduction and sensationalism. However, when *Ben Hur* and *In His Steps* were published, the books were eagerly accepted into American homes. Passages that would normally have offended their audiences were tolerated and even welcomed because of the inclusion of Jesus into the plot. It's not so bad to see sin spilled all over the page when Jesus is on the next page to clean it up.

To this day, Christian-themed literature remains popular. Popular, but not respected. Detweiler states that, other than accelerating the acceptance of the novel, “Christian fiction in America has contributed little of lasting value to serious literature” (8). One reason for this is that by introducing Jesus, the author undermines his or her own text. Writers of popular Christian literature can be equated to writers of popular romance novels. The actual text is of little consequence to the attractiveness of the book. Romance novelists strip their novels of minor characters, subplots and subtlety in order to get to the romance. When a person buys a Harlequin romance, he or she is not so much buying a book, as a romantic experience. In the same way, buying a Christian novel rewards the buyer with a short burst of religious ardour or ecstasy. To provide this product, Christian literature tends to be predictably formulaic and unchanging, and thus effects serious literature as much as does *Prisoner of Desire* by Jennifer Blake, or *Paradise in His Arms*, by Elizabeth Daniels: not at all.

Detweiler argues that the proselytizing nature of Christianity is at odds with writing good literature about Jesus. The religious writer, he states, “finds himself caught in an uneasy liason: the doctrinal Jesus he propagandizes and the symbolic Christ he tries to fashion invariably get in the way of each other, so that eventually both the art and the all-important message of his story suffer” (11).

“Religious fiction is therefore generally parasitic” (Detweiler 12).

Obviously, Detweiler is speaking generally about Christian literature. There are certainly exceptions to his censorship. However, the pitfalls inherent to writing Jesus into a fictional account should not be brushed aside, especially by a graduate student. Various creative writing teachers have gently advised me against tackling so loaded a topic. I think this is good advice. A novice attempt at writing about Jesus easily becomes a disaster. I know this, but despite the counsel I have received, I find myself being drawn to the character of God and Jesus in my writing.

Flannery O’Connor describes herself and the south she grew up in as “Christ-haunted” (qtd. in Ketchin ix). I imagine her, walking down her street in Milledgeville, knowing that Jesus is somewhere lurking beyond the corner of her eye. She goes to the grocery store; Jesus is just around the aisle picking a good melon. She goes to the library; Jesus is shelving books two rows over. She never sees him clearly, but he’s always there, down at the pool hall, mercy and judgment spilling out of his flowing sleeves as he bends over the table to take a shot.

I think I know what she meant by “Christ-haunted.” In my family the words “God,” “Jesus,” and the “Holy Ghost” were spoken as often as the words “shoe lace,” “chicken nuggets,” and “stop teasing your brother.” Being constantly surrounded by religious vocabulary and stories, I, like Faulkner, “absorbed Christianity as if by osmosis” (qtd. in Ketchin xii). How could I help it? It was natural to me to believe that if God would be there to help me say no to drugs, as my mom promised, he would also come to my classroom to learn cursive with me.

Of course, I am no longer naïve enough to think that God actually learned cursive with me in third grade—I am sure he knew it before then; however, once you are “Christ-haunted” I suspect you are always “Christ-haunted.” Everyday images, such as telephone poles, are not just telephone poles but symbols of the cross. The resurrection is everywhere: the sun setting and rising, flowers blooming, dying, then blooming again, even my leftovers from last night, frozen then heated again into their earlier splendor. I’m not saying that these things bring me any kind of religious ecstasy, or even any meaning, I am just saying that as a legitimately Christ-haunted person they seem unavoidable.

It is no wonder then that my thesis involves Jesus as a character. It is also hardly surprising that within the play, instead of being a distant, all-powerful being, he is more of a deity-next-door. In my play Jesus is exactly the kind of guy who would wash your dishes or go miniature golfing with you, and in fact, he does both.

The dilemma then comes in trying to express my light-hearted Jesus in a manner that avoids cliché and sentimentality. There are plenty of examples to draw from. A familiar deity is not a foreigner to literature or film. Consider the 1977 movie, *Oh God!*

where God was played by George Burns, who cracks jokes and dresses in a plaid shirt and a baseball cap. Or consider the more recent *Bruce Almighty*, where God is also a janitor. Both of these movies, and many like them throughout the years, rely on humorous encounters between the quotidian and the divine to captivate their audience and then end with a generic, moral message. A funny deity does well at the theatre. *Bruce Almighty* was number one at the box office when the movie was released and grossed \$85.89 million (Bruce 1).

I didn't write my play with these movies in mind, and it hurts a bit to acknowledge the similarities between my play and these movies. I don't want my play to be predictable. I've no problem with genre writing but...only if my work adds to the genre rather than merely repeating superficial traditions. However, if I am going to be honest I have to acknowledge the similarities between my work and shows like the two mentioned above. Much of the humor in my play comes from the juxtaposition of the divine and the everyday and, despite the fact that I am turning red as I type this, there is a moral at the end. Perhaps, despite my awareness of the possible traps available to literature about Christ, I have tripped into one all the same. How completely embarrassing.

I like to think, in fact I must insist, that there are *some* differences between my play and these other screenplays. I think the differences come from the attention I have paid to two other writers who incorporate a more casual Jesus into their literature. They keep the humor, but avoid the clichés that other works contain.

Levi S. Peterson, a Mormon author who in *The Backslider* portrays Jesus as a cowboy, is the first author I have tried to emulate. Jesus appears at the end of the novel and brings salvation with him for the main character, Frank. In this case Jesus is very influential and encompasses his traditional roles as Savior, mediator and even preacher of the gospel. This seems like a predictable set-up for the ending of a typical Christian novel; however, this ending is anything but trite. Part of the reason is the unexpected manner in which Jesus plays his role. Jesus appears in what the reader can only assume is a vision. Visionary visitations are not unusual for Jesus—however, the vision comes to Frank in the bathroom as he watches water flush down a urinal. When Jesus does appear, he is not dressed in robes, but as a cowboy:

The animal emerged, a shiny roan mounted by a rider. The cowboy had a beard and he wore boots, ancient chaps, a denim shirt, a creased, sweat-stained Stetson. Touching spurs lightly to his mount, he reined toward Frank. Coming close, he halted and lifted a hand. It was Jesus, his face as kind as an August dawn. (Peterson 353-354)

I have to admit, if I could have logically had my Jesus ride a horse in my play I would have. The best I could do was put him on a skateboard.

However, the unusual appearance of Jesus is not so important to Peterson's avoidance of cliché as his refusal to proselyte in the novel. In a 1999 interview he states, "You cannot give a fair reading to literature that you think in its deepest intent aims to subvert our spiritual bearings. [...] I have never thought of my writing as subverting the faith of someone who is not Mormon. I have never thought of it as a faith promoting" (qtd. in Bigelow 133).

Peterson makes the leap that Dieter accuses Christian authors of being unable to make. He separates his symbolic, self-created Jesus from his doctrinal Jesus. When Jesus suddenly appears in the swirl of a urinal, he has not come to deliver a message to the reader. He is not meant to be the reader's Jesus. He is instead a custom-made Jesus for Frank. The fact that Jesus is dressed as a cowboy, speaks in cowboy jargon and even rolls a cigarette for himself shows that this Jesus is Frank's Jesus, and in fact, inhabits all characteristics that Frank holds most valuable. In this way the novel maintains its integrity. Jesus does not try to solve the problems of all mankind; instead, Jesus only reflects what Frank already knows. In *The Backslider*, Jesus is more a foil to Frank than a preacher to the audience.

In *WWJD* I have attempted to create a custom-made Jesus as well. Typical only in his traditional dress, my Jesus has the mannerisms of a college student. In the play he doesn't reveal anything that the characters don't already know. He doesn't represent a Savior of mankind that all men should turn to, as much as he represents the Jesus of the apartment. At the end of the play, the audience doesn't experience any sort of rapture inclining them to change their lives and follow the skateboarding Jesus. Jesus isn't there for them.

The second author I tried to emulate as I wrote my play was J.D. Salinger. In *Franny and Zooey*, Salinger introduces Jesus as an influence in his novel but doesn't give him any of his own lines. The characters refer often to who Jesus is and what he would do, but the only account of interaction with Jesus comes to the reader third hand. Franny relates a story her brother told her:

You know what he swore up and down to me? He told me last night that he once had a glass of ginger ale with Jesus in the kitchen when he was eight years old[...] He said he was - this is exactly what he said - he said he was sitting at the table in the kitchen, all by himself, drinking a glass of ginger ale and eating *saltines* and reading '*Dombey and Son*', and all of a sudden Jesus sat down in the other chair and asked if he could have a small glass of ginger ale. A *small* glass, mind you - that's exactly what he said. (Salinger 190-191)

What, I ask, is more delightful than the idea of Jesus sharing some saltines and ginger ale with an eight-year-old kid? Nothing. It's delightful, it's funny, and it's captivating. In fact, it is so perfect I let Jesus have some ginger ale in my play as well.

Other than being charming, Jesus having a small snack with a kid represents no moral message. There is no lesson Jesus is teaching here, at least none obvious to the reader. His appearance in the book is ambiguous. This is not to say the story itself is amoral. On the contrary, the plot centers around a girl trapped in an ethical meltdown and her struggle through it, along with her brother's struggle to understand her, make up the whole story. The key here is that the moral struggle, which is very real in the story, is not resolved by Jesus. He delivers no platitudes, no advice, no Judea-wisdom. In fact, all he does is eat someone else's saltines. The struggle and resolution are human. Jesus is a presence (a haunt) but not an active player in the conflict. This eliminates the trite solution of having Jesus come and deliver a happily-ever-after. In *Franny and Zooey* the characters are forced to confront the problem themselves.

I tried to do this in my play as well. In *WWJD* Jesus is surrounded by human problems, but the only constructive thing he does is build paper cranes. He seems benevolent, but remains powerless in the face of human conflict. In this way, he emulates Salinger's Jesus. He is present as a force but refuses or is unable to provide the answers the characters ask for.

If I have been successful in distancing my symbolic Jesus from my doctrinal Jesus I am now faced with a new problem, the same problem that Salinger and Peterson are faced with. (It makes me happy to make myself a part of their group.) By creating an atypical Jesus I easily ostracize myself from my audience. In fact, the dilemma is greater for me as a playwright than it is for Salinger and Peterson because instead of allowing my audience the freedom to imagine Jesus in their heads as a novel writer would, I put Jesus right in front of their eyes...and then I strip him of many of his conventions.

It's true, as Ong stated, that the audience and I have an unspoken agreement that they will become a fiction to access my work, but this is a tenuous agreement. They came to the show and were told they would see Jesus but suddenly this purported Jesus is doing the moonwalk. The audience agreed to meet me halfway, but if they feel I am not doing my share to meet them, they will quickly walk out.

It's not necessarily a matter of alienating a conservative or overly sensitive audience either. Consider Peterson's words again: "You cannot give a fair reading to literature that you think in its deepest intent aims to subvert our spiritual bearings." Is it possible to show an audience a form of Jesus without intending to subvert their religious bearings on some level?

My intent in writing this play was not to build faith; nor was it to destroy faith. However, if I said I did not want my audience to reevaluate the relationship of man to faith and divinity, I would be lying. Isn't that subversion? I show them Jesus washing dishes and I want them to think about the paradox of the Son of God with a sponge: Isn't that subversion?

So the greatest dilemma in writing my play was to keep my audience from walking out on me. I want to emphasize again, that I am not talking merely about a conservative, Christian audience. Knowing my audience is imaginary makes it much larger than that. It's not only that I don't want my audience to feel I've betrayed their beloved image of Jesus, but I also don't want them to think that I have turned him into the saccharine-sweet, happy-ending-maker that will be predictable to them. My audience is the ideal other and this other is willing to be reasonably open-minded and reasonably critical. My Jesus, though created for the college apartment he visits, must not cause my audience to retract their trust from me. I don't mind if they get uncomfortable, they just can't leave.

I've employed two specific methods to maintain my audience. The first is no surprise; I have tried to make my play a comedy. This is expected. After all, both Peterson and Salinger's accounts of Jesus have a certain amount of humor in them. The humor allows Jesus to step outside the conventional box, but recognizes that this is a departure from the normal by allowing the audience to laugh at his atypical behavior.

It also allows the audience to forgive Jesus's lack of support for typical Christian values by separating Jesus from what they have expected him to be. For example, when

Jesus skateboards across the room, he skateboards right across conventional expectations of himself. Jesus only walks or sometimes rides a white ass. Placing him on a skateboard is over-the-top enough to inform the audience that this is a fictional character rather than a Christian symbol. This makes it easier for the audience to remain attentive after Max is hurt and Jesus refuses to help. Without humor this would be a potentially offensive action for Jesus to take. A Jesus who acts like he doesn't love us? Humor allows my audience the chance to meet with Jesus as well as me on the fictive plane.

The second method I employ is eliminating any of Jesus's dialogue. Jesus doesn't say a word in the whole play. Ironically, after distancing the audience from Jesus as a doctrinal figure and making him seem a true character, silencing Jesus allows the audience to apply their own perceptions of Jesus to the staged Jesus. Whenever Jesus communicates, the audience cannot hear him. They are required to hear the interpretation of what he says given by the other characters, none of whom is reliable. This allows the audience a certain amount of freedom in ascribing meaning to the stage Jesus. Instead of having to reconcile the stage Jesus's words and tone with their own imagined deity, they are allowed to interpret his actions as they may. Even on the stage, different characters interpret what they purportedly hear Jesus say differently. This allows the audience to do the same. By both distancing Jesus and allowing the audience to recreate him for themselves, I attempt to maintain my audience.

WWJD was my first serious attempt to write something approachable and significant while still indulging in my personal Christ-haunted interests. I am unsure if I have really succeeded. I worry mostly, that it does not overcome its genre. I pretend I am

professional enough to do to Christian playwriting what Cormac McCarthy does to cowboy stories. But then I look over my play, and I see Jesus telling Max to look into a mirror and evaluate her self-worth. I see Max giving Jesus a hug and I think: “Did I just have Jesus *hug* someone? What kind of joint am I running here?” In some ways I think there may always be a trace of the trite and corny in my plays, stories, poetry or whatever, because there is a strong sense of the corny in me. My one comfort is that there is at least always an audience for that.

The End.

No. Actually, not really the end at all. So I’ve learned a bit about audience and Jesus in literature, but there is a lack of resolution to this essay that bothers me. About a month ago my husband off-handedly remarked that I was no longer a poet. When I angrily protested, he was surprised, “But you haven’t written a poem this past year! How can you be a poet if you don’t write poetry?” I made him take it back and also clean the bathroom as a punishment, but he has a point. I entered the Master’s program with a collection of poetry—but my thesis is a play. I love playwriting. I’m proud of this play. But I wrote a play in large part because this was the only medium with which I could actually see the face(s) of my audience. A fictive audience is all well and good, but I am still compelled to see the face. Ong is logically convincing to me...yet sometimes in writing I still feel irresponsible to the other.

I sit down to write a poem, and I see the encouraging but slightly bored faces of my professors. I write a few lines until it occurs to me that I might better spend my time

washing the dishes from last night. But when I hear my play performed before a live audience it is different. It doesn't matter that I know a single theater audience is not my real audience. I watch them laugh or frown or sigh and for a moment I feel that the fictive plane is nothing and that here we are in our respective theater seats having a face to face conversation. At least I feel this way for an instant until we all leave the theater and our moment of communion is over. Suddenly we are strangers again, and I wonder about the value of that moment.

Working with plays involves the audience in a way that my poetry writing does not. A poem requires a writer and a good editor (who can sometimes be the same person). A play requires a playwright, a director, a producer, and actors...not to mention dramaturges, stage crew, make-up crew, ushers, ticket sellers etc. I wrote the play, yes, but it was much more of a community activity than any other type of writing I have ever experienced. In workshopping the play, actors read my lines aloud. This allowed actors to add meaning to my text, transforming me into my own audience. On their side, the actors became both audience and creator. They heard lines written by a separate author, but then made them their own. In some ways, it is the perfect level of creation.

When I sit down to write a play, I have a fictive audience in mind; however, through the process of workshopping and producing a play, my audience interacts with me in an instant and direct way that alters my idea of them. I am still alone when I write, but I can count on my fictive audience to suddenly materialize in the face of an actor or director to give me a face to face reaction to my words. That is satisfying! That is communication! But still, there is a part of me that cannot close this essay.

Mostly, I wish I could end this essay with some little anecdote that would show you (my imagined reader) that after a thorough investigation of the problem of audience, my writer self has made peace with my social work self. If I could just recall some nice story where the greater art of literature overshadows the temporal nature of soup kitchens in its ability to reach and sustain the other I could easily end this essay. The truth is there is no such anecdote. Writing this paper has only heightened my awareness of the problem. This winter, I have spent most of my time in the library, reading and writing. My last winter as an undergraduate, I spent most of my time in elementary schools interviewing kids and investigating possible incidents of child abuse. It would have been nice if Levinas had explained in his work, not just why we serve the other, but a clear outline of the best way to do that. Even the scriptures, God's instructions for our lives, don't clear up this question for me...though it is interesting that they are delivered to me in the form of a text. Instead I will conclude with two vignettes that keep me up at night, one already mentioned in this paper.

After many apologies for the form and style, I finally gave my poem I wrote to my brother Tom. He read it out loud then looked down at me, a bit shocked. He said, "This is not how I would say it, or even think about it. I would not have chosen these words. Good grief, this is not even what happened. You got your facts all wrong. But somehow, it's absolutely right. I mean, you've told it the way I didn't even know it happened."

One of the girls asked me the following question: “Do you really believe that you will be doing anything as a writer that is more important than what you are doing here?”

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