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The Atheist's Bible

DYING OF LIVER CANCER upstairs, Dad slept only three or four hours at night, ate one skimpy meal a day, and edited his *Atheist's Bible*, an annotated anthology of philosophers from the ancient Greeks to Sartre. Every hour his old printer roared and rattled to life, giving Mom and me a start. Would he rest, we wondered, or resume his feverish work?

His crimsoned eyes gave off a queer, bleary light. His sucked-in cheeks glowed like sallow candles. Secretive and withdrawn, he wouldn't tell how much morphine maintained his mad schedule.

Mom toiled in the garden—"to keep my sanity," she muttered. In the evenings she nodded off on the living room sofa, an open book and her reading glasses nestled on her chest. Anxious, gloomy, but excited, I crammed for my finals in philosophy. Fumes and the scents of freshly mown lawns wafted through the neighbourhood. Shrieking kids played street hockey until after dark. In the dead of night, only my father's tramping up and down the staircase, or a lonely cat meowing outdoors disturbed me.

"Thank you for your comments," Dad told me one evening. He was referring to my written feedback on the margins of his two-inch thick manuscript.

So far, I'd held back my resentment about his treatment of Freud, even writing a special introduction about his influence on psychiatry, a distinction not accorded to any other thinker. Why did he give so much space to his idol at others' expense? But what was the point of confronting a man with only weeks to live? What significant passages could he revise, what chapters rewrite?

Dad's dogged commitment to his book pissed me off. His project had been completed, but pig-headedly he strove for editorial perfection. What for? No more than five thousand copies of his book would ever be printed. Only three or four reviewers would read his book from cover to cover!

He had lost much weight. His pants hung loose and awkward from his tightened belt. His shirts floated above collapsed shoulders. Months before he had fainted at his hospital office. The chief of pathology forbade him to come back. In retaliation for his forced retirement, whenever he wasn't writing he tottered up and down the staircase, a declaration of being alive.

From behind my closed door I'd hear Mom on the upper landing asking, "But Joel, how *are* you feeling?"

"I've been better, I've been worse," he'd say. At other times he'd answer, "Okay," or "Not too bad."

I gritted my teeth. Herr Doctor was not happy with a well-edited, *finished* manuscript on his desk! Why wasn't he saying goodbye to his family? Why not be honest, grieve his approaching death? With weeks to live, why did he have to polish each sentence into glimmering Carrara marble?

One night I woke to my shoulder being shaken. I blinked to avoid the eye-piercing ceiling light.

Mom stood by my bed, her robe untied. "Wake up, Marvin! Wake up."

Muscles aching, I rubbed my sore eyes. I'd been typing till two in the morning. "*What?* What now?"

"Your father threw up blood. He flushed it down the toilet, but I saw stains."

I sat up. "What do you want *me* to do, Mom? He doesn't want any fucking help. He wants to write till he croaks."

She tied up her robe. "Maybe he should see a psychiatrist."

"A shrink? Sorry, Mom. He'll kick the bucket before the Prozac kicks in."

"No! No pills! I meant for him to talk to someone, get things off his chest. He's so lonely, so scared."

"Where the hell is he?"

"In his study."

I knocked on his door. No answer. I sidled into his fortress, now barely lit by a reading lamp on his desk. On his computer monitor, black double-spaced lines crowded the off-white screen. "C:\WP51\BIBLE.34" shone in the bottom left corner.

I leaned closer. The thirty-fourth version of his book? Was he psychotic?

Behind me, Mom turned on the ceiling light.

"I was trying ..." he raised his head from the pillow, "to fall asleep" A twig of coagulated blood spread from one corner of his mouth to his neck. Red stains the size of cookies glimmered on his pillow. Blood on his shirt, too. Slowly he sat up. "Take me to the General."

He stayed in the hospital for two days. We visited him every evening. He lay canted in a tall bed with a manual crank. Against the chalk-white sheets and pillow his brown eyes glittered. His face had grown so papery that his Auschwitz-survivor cheekbones were about to pierce the skin. The nose, enlarged and crooked, seemed ready to collapse. His kindling-thin fingers rested on a blue hospital blanket.

He stared at us. "They want to give me chemo. Do they expect me to ignore the side effects? No way. I can't write if I stay in this joint. I've more important things to do."

"We brought you a few pages, pencils, and erasers," Mom cajoled him. "You can work right here." Her hard look urged me to intervene, but I shrugged.

Dad signed himself out of the hospital against medical advice. "I got a couple of fresh ideas," he said, sluggishly climbing the stairs to his study.

He didn't come down for meals. My furious, frightened mother took soup and pureed vegetables to his desk.

Every so often his printer rattled.

Despite the ambience of doom at home, I sang and danced when a form letter from New York University announced that I had been accepted to graduate school in philosophy. My studies would start right after Labour Day.

The next morning, as I scanned the "Help Wanted" section of the *Toronto Star*, a van parked by our driveway. A delivery man in a brown shirt and pants toted a large manila parcel. He strode to our front door.

The bell rang. I opened the door. "Doctor Kleinberg is ill. I'll sign for him."

The man handed me a blue ballpoint pen. As I signed the clipboard, I yelled above the noise of the printer's machine-gun patter, "Dad! There's a parcel for you!"

"Be down in a minute," he shouted back. "Put the parcel on the coffee table."

One hand clutching the rail like a toddler, one step at a time, he eased down the staircase. Once he set his feet on the main floor, he doddered to the glass-covered table. His eyes glistened. "Please bring me a butcher's knife."

In two surgical strokes he scalped open the brown tape around it and tore off the wrapping paper. From inside the box his gaunt, trembling fingers eased out a pewter urn shaped like the Stanley Cup. He removed the lid, bent forward, and examined the inside.

Mom came into the room. He handed her the urn. She clutched it with her hands. "But Joel, what is *this*?" she asked, more angry than curious. She turned the vessel all around. "I can't believe it! Why *are* you doing this to us?" She banged the urn to the floor. Tears rilled down her cheeks. "I can't take it any more! I'm going for a walk!"

"Pat!" Dad raised his cavernous voice. "Let me explain!"

She headed through the vestibule and slammed the front door shut.

Heart whamming, I scooped up the urn. Its walls were thin. It weighed less than a pound. Close to the rim an engraving proclaimed, "Here Lies An Individual." A smaller engraving announced, "Joel Kleinberg, 1942–1994, Editor of the *Atheist's Bible*."

Had he lost touch with reality? Was he oblivious to the people who cared about him? "But Dad!" I yelled. "How the hell could you do that?"

"Do what? What's wrong? Don't I deserve to choose my own tombstone?"

"Dad! You decided to be *cremated*!"

"You got it, son. What *is* the problem? Why can't your mother and you respect my last wishes?"

"But Dad, Mom likes traditions, like candles on Fridays, fasting on Yom Kippur. Her parents were Orthodox. A cremation would crush her."

He picked up the lid by its knob and pounded it onto the urn. "Look, Marvin, I'm not interested in sentimental rituals that cost an arm and a leg. I got my urn for one hundred and forty dollars, engraving and tax included."

"That's it!" I muttered, a futile attempt to curb my fury. "You didn't consult us! Mom is right. You don't give a shit about us."

His stoical mask fell. "Selfish!" he barked. "Inconsiderate! Selfish! I'm sick and tired of hearing about my selfishness. This is the only death I'll ever have!"

Scared and disbelieving, I crawled to the wing chair. I sat down.

He picked up his urn and eyed it lovingly. He smiled. "My unveiled tombstone!"

"But what about us?"

"No problem. I'm leaving behind a million dollars in life insurance, the house is paid off, five hundred grand in RRSPs, a lot of good IBM stock."

I shook my head. We were both *pretending* this was a man-to-man talk. We raised our voices, traded passionate words, shoved arguments down each other's throats. But we belonged to different worlds. His eyes were set on the impenetrable continents of nothingness. He wished, above all, to be recognized and remembered as a brilliant scholar. His tenacity at the end of his road struck me as inhuman, outrageous, bizarre.

My world stood uncharted. I bobbed between undergraduate and graduate schools, between Toronto and New York. Who the hell was I?

The spark in his eyes died down. "I know Mom and you will grieve after I go. But I'm not trying to put a lid—no pun intended—on anybody's feelings."

We glared past each other in silence, avoiding eye contact. A car rattled by, probably interrupting children from playing tag.

"Please, Dad, *please*. We're worried. You're unable to see what you're doing to yourself."

"Look! I led a pretty conventional life. At the end of the line I'm dying in an unorthodox fashion. Is that so hard to take?"

"Yes!"

His expression grew tired. He looked grey. "Please bear with me. In a few days it'll be over."

"How much morphine are you taking, Dad?"

"A lot," he replied, embarrassed. "But it gives me more quality time than the goddamn chemo ever would."

"And the book?"

"I'll never be satisfied! But when I meet my maker, you'll find on my desk a printed draft and two sets of backed-up diskettes."

My heart raced. Meet my maker? What was behind his atheist's front? I got up and laid my hand on his shoulder. "Would you like me to say Kaddish after you?"

His mocking eyes gazed into mine. "Thank you, son, but no, thank you. Not at all. Freud and Sartre were my rabbis. They taught me I need no prayers before and after I go."

Two nights later he stood on the landing and shouted, "Marvin, please come up!"

He led me into his study. By his computer stood the swiveling chair and an upholstered stool from his bedroom. "Sit down," he urged me. "I want to show you something." From his bookshelf he pulled out an old, black volume and handed it to me. He lounged on his chair as I inspected the book. The barely gilded letters on the front cover were still legible: "Holy Bible." The right bottom corner bore a faint inscription: "Placed by the Gideons."

For the first time in my life I riffled through a King James Bible. There were lines in several languages, including Hebrew. More than puzzled, I waited.

"That's how my project got started, fifteen years ago," he said. "I was in Montreal to read a paper at a convention I didn't feel like attending. After my presentation and several particularly obnoxious questions from the audience, I felt immensely tired. My friends went for dinner in Old Montreal, but I didn't join them. An overwhelming need to be alone took over. The idea of hearing a human voice gave me goose bumps. In my hotel room I disconnected the phone and turned off the light. I lay in bed like a mummy. Mesmerized, I listened to the air conditioner whirring.

"There was no past, no present, no future. I undressed, crawled under the blanket, but couldn't fall asleep. Out of the blue a thunderbolt made me sit up. 'Who the fuck are you? Who the fuck are you?' It was not a hallucination, but an unrelenting inner voice asking me who was I.

"At last I answered, 'A pathologist.'" I presented the evidence: medical school, four years of residence, written and oral exams, a paper almost every year. All this didn't shut up the voice."

He stopped and drew in his breath. "The interrogation went on. 'Who the fuck are you?' I've no idea how long it lasted. I begged the voice to let me sleep!"

He massaged his belly. “Frantically I searched for something to read besides professional articles. When I opened the top drawer of the bedside table, I found this Bible.”

“You mean, you *stole* the Bible?”

“Yeah,” he managed to smile. “The rest of the evening I read the passages recommended when feeling afraid, anxious, backsliding.”

“Next day I woke up at noon, the Gideon Bible open on my chest.”

I brought my chair closer. “What did you get out of it?”

“The realization that *some people* have a book to read when they feel awful. What could a godless Jew read?”

He eased himself up. “Back in a sec,” he said, and left the room.

I closed my eyes. He was popping more morphine.

Minutes later he returned, his sparse hair combed, the face seeming less wrinkled. He sat down. “I’m a doctor,” he resumed. “I believe in science, in biology. None of this watery horseshit about ‘I *think*, therefore I am.’” He glared at me, as if I had authored the dictum he hated so much. “I think only as long as my brain is alive! For *twenty-five* years I’ve been a pathologist. Not even *once* have I come across what you airy-fairy philosophers call soul, or any such crap.”

I patted his knee. “Relax, Dad. We’re not going to solve all these problems today.”

He glanced at my hand. “The body just is. At the end of the road it fucks up, but it’s all we have to go by. Birth, death, and everything in between are blue skies patched on and off with black clouds.”

I nodded. He desperately wanted me to remember him and each one of his arguments. I felt sad. Once again, that thick mist between us.

“Ostensibly,” he said, “I edited my little Bible to collect the classics in the field. Personally, I didn’t want to hear questions about my feathery identity.”

The room had grown darker. An aroma of roasting chicken floated up from the kitchen; there would be pasta and tossed salad, too.

He stared at his computer for a moment. He eyed me. “Contempt,” he turned and eyed me, “I’ve come to realize, is the root of my atheism. Contempt for the masses that yearn for prophets who

will tell them how to live; contempt for navel gazers who preach that death and dying have a meaning. Meaning outside the boundaries of a living body? Marvin! There are more fools than sand in the sea!"

His dry eyes and knitted brows spoke of a lonely man. Would he poke his neck out of his shell and share his terrors with me?

No.

"Dinner time!" Mom called from downstairs.

"Dad," I said. "In your book you've given a lot of space to Freud. Come on, a Jew, a doctor, eh?"

"Oh, no! He was the most quoted writer in this century. Except for a lethal dose, he refused to take painkillers. He wanted to stay lucid to the bitter end."

"Did that inspire you not to take chemo?"

"Yeah. We atheists have no recipes for a long, happy life. But we die without sentimental lullabies about a loving Big Daddy up there."

Dad and I had no further heart-to-hearts. A few days later he cascaded down the stairs and was taken to a hospital. Hours later he died.

He was cremated, but Mom insisted we sit shiva. She crouched on the living-room sofa, crying without tears. Relatives, friends, neighbours, and Dad's colleagues paraded by us, mumbling their sorrow. They patted me on the shoulder. They whispered words of comfort. I bit my tongue. The condolences crowd didn't know how infuriating my father had been, as he sat upstairs by his desk, writing and dying.

Days after his death, the funeral home delivered the pewter urn with his ashes. I set it by the fireplace. That same afternoon I mailed the last version of his manuscript to Mr. Castlefield, the literary agent my father had hired. I kept one backed-up diskette in his study, another in Mom's safety deposit box. Now that his printer no longer clanked and clattered upstairs, the house sounded eerily quiet. Mom and I never entered his study.

Three months later, during the Christmas vacation, Mr. Castlefield was in our house, sitting on the sofa Dad had liked. The balding, bespectacled, heavysset agent rubbed his pink hands. Bearing good news, or just warming his palms? "I'm happy to let you know that Joel's book was accepted for publication." He shot glances

at Mom and me. He waited for his words to sink in. "He'd have been very proud." He wore a professorial mask. "Yale University Press, however, wants some changes. First, the title has to go. Too offensive, too controversial. It'll raise eyebrows. They want something like, 'Atheism: An Anthology'."

"Hell no!" I blurted out. "Out of the question!"

"Let Mr. Castlefield talk," Mom said.

"Also," the agent went on, "the publisher wants to omit some annotations. The book is scholarly and well-edited, but it's too subjective, not critical enough of certain writers."

"Come on, that's his legacy!" I butted in. "Fifteen years he worked on it! We'll look somewhere else."

The agent exhaled, impatient. "It'll be the same everywhere. The book is excellent, but the title and some passages are too provocative."

"Marvin," Mom turned to me, "why are you getting so worked up? We're talking about minor changes."

"No way, Mom! We're not changing the title or the tone of the book." I stood up and walked to the fireplace. I lifted the urn with Dad's ashes and handed it to the philistine agent.

He scrutinized the urn. He pursed his lips. He mumbled, "Is that why you don't want any changes?"

"Over my dead body!" I stared at my mother, furious. "How could you even think of another title? At the end, the book was everything—his life, his passion."

"Do *I* know that," she replied. "No need to rub it in."

A week ago, Mr. Castlefield sent us another of several letters. After two years, North American publishers had refused even to cast a glance at the book. Now, The World Of Ideas, a Dutch publisher, had agreed to bring it out, unchanged, provided that the author's estate bought two thousand hard bound copies in advance.

Two thousand? In advance? Mom and I looked at each other.

These days, we are busy compiling a list. Two thousand libraries will be mailed the *Atheist's Bible* free of charge.