

# Can I Take My Gun Up To Heaven?

*by* Jason Behrends

He called it Job. The story goes he carved it the day my sister Ruth was born out of the eight foot oak cross his Church had used during last year's crucifixion reenactment. It's a long standing tradition of the Church that the new fathers take a section of this blessed wood, as if it was God's own hand, and use it to guide and strengthen their families. It took him nearly a month to finish his project, the cross-shaped cutouts to leave a holy mark, the verses etched in the handle, the stain and varnish, it really was a work of art. The Friday after Ruth's first birthday all the men of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church gathered to bless the 'instruments of faith' they had created, and properly establish the purpose behind these tools and pray for guidance and understanding.

The Church was a run down building surrounded by cornfields and a rusted chain link fence. The unlit sign in front always had a witty message to grab the attention of the random traveler on the typically motionless road. That day it read, "Don't let TV control what belongs to God." White paint, now chipped and yellowing, covered the gray weather beaten siding. The cement stairs leading into the one room facility were crumbling, and the elders had placed planks of wood over each step for safety purposes. During these Vespers, the men circled around the pile of paddles in the center of the sanctuary. The carpet was lime green and was still filled with salt and filth from the recently broken winter. As they circled they chanted, *Deus, in adiutorium meum intende. Domine, ad adiuvandum me festina. Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto. Sicut erat in principio, et nunc et semper, et in saecula saeculorum. Amen. Alleluia.* The minister walked into the center of circle carrying a black cloth bag with a deep red Chi Rho stitched across the front. He quickly pulled the crimson rope that had held the bag

closed and threw the contents at the pile. A Cottonmouth Snake landed directly on the mound of carved wood and began to dart and jump at the farmers and workers as they chanted. The Minister rang the bell, and the men rushed for their paddles. My Father grabbed his work of art, and smashed the snake right below the head with an upper cut. This launched the serpent into the air, and as it elevated higher he grab his ankle-holstered blade and severed the snakes head as it returned to the circle. He returned home a Deacon, covered in venom and guts and rage.

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By the time I joined the family, Ruth was already a brittle shell of a girl. A nine year old with the mindset of forty-year-old recluse postal work and a body only found in work camps and sweat shops. She spent most of her days hiding in the back of her closet, surrounded by pillows and brutalized stuffed animals, praying to a God she openly refused to believe in. Her only refuge was the few hours a day that our Mother Esther was allowed to home school her. Ester was meek in constitution, but not is sized. Morris, their Church, and their financial situation had forced her to wear one of the two long pale dresses that she owned, and she typically went with out shoes. Her hair, streaked with gray, was always pulled back in bun, a style that only extenuated the bags and bruises that clung to her eyes. Ruth cherished their time together, and surprisingly excelled in her studies. She would spend hours reading the novels that Ester would smuggle into the house, and then hid them deep in the walls of her closet.

During school time, I would sit at my Mother's feet and stare the rare and beautiful smile that would be stretched across my sister's face. Ruth refused to call me by my Biblical name, opting for the more playful Danny. Despite the cross-shaped welts and scars, Ruth could still find moments and reasons and ways to simply be a nine-year-old girl. Her hair was a magical shade of orange, something of a cross between the tabby cat I would chase through the yard and the illusive glass of orange juice I would receive on holidays. She would try to tell me that she was more closely related to that wild

cornfield cat then to our father Morris. I didn't believe her, but I did enjoy watching the colorful explosions in the center of her eyes as they darted wildly back and forth. Just like that cat, she was always ready to pounce, well actually she was always ready to jump back into the closet, but still with cat-like reflexes.

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Oceans of corn and soybeans surrounded the rural two-street town we called home. Ours was the third house in on a row of fifteen, and Morris made no attempts to keep up appearances. The gravel driveway was always filled with beaten and rusted cars that he would work on for the local speedway. Yet, at the center was his prized box truck. It was painted bright blue with bold white lettering proclaiming "Go Gutters" owned the town. Our two-story house was a pale and fading shade of tan, and over grown evergreen bushes had almost fully covered the first floor windows that faced our quiet country road. We had established trees, a fully stocked garden, a tree house, and a sandbox, but rarely left the house.

Entering the house though the side door, you can either go down to the basement or up to the main level. Work boots, coveralls, and a collection strange and sweaty mesh trucker hats all paved the way up the stairs to the kitchen. The tile in the kitchen was cracked and stained, wild and outdated, a mix of lime green and orange that ran straight into the deep brown cupboards and matching green stove and fridge. Next to the stove there was metal hook with the letters "JOB" etched in the wood above it, and hanging below was the paddle. The mere presents of the beastly object made my heart race even though I had only heard stories of the pain that it can inflict. The smell of must, fear, sweat, and stale bread constantly filled the house. Our mother did her best, but there was still a layer of filth that went overlooked on a daily basis. That is except for one isolated room just beyond the living room wall. As cautiously as a three year old can move, I begin to slowly walk over the matted and dusty brown living room carpet towards my father's office.

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It was a makeshift sliding door, unfinished plywood, that protected his world from ours. He called it his “bunker”, and it held all of his collections, papers, and dreams. I knew I was not allowed, but I had to know more about him. I wanted to get closer without physical touching him, and I thought this room might just be the key. I slowly slid the door open and climbed a chair to pull the string for light. The room was actually a 7x7 cube with floor to ceiling bookshelves that cover two of the four walls. On the wall to my left was a homemade desktop with papers and books everywhere. To my right was a large footlocker from his days in the Marines, and a 1973 Philips 547 Record Changer. Ruth had told me all about his collection of Bibles, and also warned me about this room. She would say, “He goes on and on about some 1896 Newberry or the 1909 Scofield, and there was time when I thought I cared”. I understood why she no longer cared, but I wanted to see these things he treasured. I wanted to know why he had an anchor tattooed on his forearm and what he might listen to on the interesting looking player. I climbed up on the footlocker and started to reach for the arm of the record player when I heard the front door open.

I had never felt this feeling before, my skin felt like it was moving, and my hands suddenly became moist and began to shake. My stomach began to spin and the room started to fade. I didn't know why I was feeling this way, but I knew I had to do something. I thought of Ruth burrowed deep in the nest of her closet and quickly jumped into the footlocker. I nearly stopped breathing as he entered his bunker. You would have thought he was in full Marines Corp dress, but the simple gutter man had found other ways to command his families respect. He wasn't all that tall or strong, with curly muddy hair that slightly reciting. He always wore the same stained and torn jeans, classic mustard work boots, and oversized glasses that magnified the stress lines and circles that permanently encased his eyes. As he sat at his desk he began to cry. It was slight at first, a welling and a few shallow tears, but soon he was sobbing uncontrollably. Inside the trunk it was dark and musty, I felt

something cold under my feet, but it was impossible to see what it was. I wanted to crawl out and give him a hug, but fear would not allow me to move. Hours went by as I waited with the cold black metal object now in my hands.

