

SECOND COMING

A man walks into a bar. He wears a hazmat suit and holds a gun in his right hand. When he speaks, it's as if his voice comes from the bottom of a hole that's opened up in the center of the bar.

“You! After all this time, I've found You!”

A group of poker players freeze in mid-action, all except one who gazes patiently at the strange, white-clothed figure.

“It's You, isn't it? I'm sure of it! I've searched the world for You, and now, at last, I've found You!”

The man at the table, still holding two cards close to his chest, responds calmly, “And what will you do, now that you've found me?”

The man in the white suit wavers, his body swaying slightly, unable to take his eyes from the seated figure. He glances about the bar as if suddenly uncertain.

A Bob Seger song rasps from the smoke filled fringes of the room. Behind the poker players, above the long wooden bar, a baseball game unfolds in silence. Through the clear plastic visor, he studies the man at the table, notes his brown, shaggy hair; the soft, almost delicate, searching brown eyes; the scraggy beard.

“Why are You here? Why have You not redeemed the world?”

“You mean by ‘the world,’ all you true believers? All you desperate, dangerous souls who want to make me into something I'm not? No. Been there; done that. I think I'll just keep it simple this time.”

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“You are a defiler! An impediment to Truth! There is only one thing left for me to do!”

He raises his gloved right hand, pointing the gun at the seated man. The other poker players duck for cover, scattering cards and chips heedlessly, but the seated man doesn't move, only stares, his expression unreadable.

The shots ring out—one, two, three—in rapid succession. The seated man is blown backwards, as if from a stiff wind, dark liquid quickly staining the already filthy wooden floor.

The man in the hazmat suit stands motionless. Too faintly for any of the others to hear, he announces, “I've killed Him. I've killed God,” tosses the gun away and flees the bar.

As class ends, the professor says, in a voice just loud enough to be heard over the scraping of chairs and the shuffling of feet, “Mr. Wright, may I see you in my office, please?”

For just a moment, Patrick stiffens, ashamed, but when he turns, he sees the professor is smiling. No, not really smiling, expectant.

“Certainly, sir.”

He follows the old man to his office. It takes several minutes because the professor moves so slowly, but Patrick doesn't mind. The professor is a great man. He's learned much from him.

Once the professor has settled into his chair, he stares at Patrick for several long seconds. “You are the best of my students.”

Patrick is caught off guard. He can't quite stifle the grin that creases his face.

“It's a compliment, yes,” the professor adds, “but it carries a burden.” The old man starts to say something else but suddenly appears lost, forlorn. When he recovers, he says, “I'm dying. I've spent my life on one mission—one single mission. Now, because time is short, I must ask

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you to take up my mission. Someone must, because it is the most important mission in the world.”

The look on the old man’s face sends Patrick’s thoughts reeling. Unconsciously, he grips the chair with both hands. He flinches from the professor’s stare, before slowly forcing himself to meet the other’s gaze. “I will not fail you. What is it I must do? What is this mission?”

The professor releases a faint sigh, almost a wheeze. “To find God--”

“Yes, of course,” Patrick jumps in, eager to show solidarity with his hero, but the look on the old man’s face silences him.

“...and, if necessary,” the professor finishes, staring hard at Patrick, “kill Him.”

A tiny, nearly inaudible gasp escapes Patrick’s lungs. He looks around, as if he’s not sure where the sound sprang from. Surely the professor is joking. He casts a tentative glance toward the old man, whose deadly serious expression rattles him more than any compliment ever could. For a moment it feels as if the great stacks of books towering around him are about to collapse and bury him alive. What can he possibly say? The professor, his hero, has gone—

“You probably think me mad,” the Professor says. “I may be old, but I’m not crazy.”

The professor pauses to shift his thick glasses slightly forward and pinch the bridge of his nose between two gnarled fingers.

“I was like you once—certain of God’s love, content to wait for His return, but the more I studied, the more troubled I became.”

“Troubled, sir?” Patrick manages to mumble.

“Yes, troubled. So many of the old books speak of God’s eventual return, but slowly, steadily, I began to uncover hints.”

“Hints, sir?”

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The professor smiles. “I appreciate your effort to at least hear me out. That is, in part, why I chose you. I know this is difficult, and I don’t expect you to believe me. Not now. Not yet.”

Patrick is beginning to recover a bit of his equilibrium. The old man doesn’t actually sound crazy. In fact, he sounds quite lucid. Patrick starts to speak, but the old man cuts him off.

“No, no, don’t bother denying it. The hints were...extremely subtle. However, I will leave it to you to discover them for yourself. But that is what I ask of you—to do your own research, come to your own conclusions. Then do what you think is best.”

“My own conclusions? On what, sir?” Patrick can’t help a hint of petulance from leaking into his voice.

The professor responds with a head shake that turns into a shrug and concludes with an audible sigh. “The books from the Bible to the Kaballah to the Quran all speak of God’s return.”

“He will.”

“What if He already has? What if He’s here now, living amongst us?”

“But why, sir? Why would He return unannounced?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps He has turned His back on us, forsaken us as Peter forsook Him. Perhaps He suffers from doubt. But if He has returned, He must be dealt with. The equation that exists between God and Man must be put back into balance.”

Something in the professor’s words strikes a chord in Patrick. The world does feel out of balance. It had always been obvious that Christianity was the only true and meaningful Path, but if so, why is there so much confusion and mistrust in the world? With that realization, Patrick knows that he will take up the Professor’s quest, carry on his Mission. He will, if possible, find God.

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For five years Patrick studies, first the books given to him by his professor, then others he ferrets out on his own after the professor's death. It is a difficult task, made more difficult by the vagueness that hides what he comes to think of as the 'exquisite subtlety,' but at last he is certain. Not only does he believe the promise that God will indeed return to his world, but he is convinced it has already happened, must have happened if the old texts, with their nearly impenetrable hints, are to be believed. God is here, on Earth, right now.

Two more years pass as Patrick researches the why of this Truth. Why has He not reclaimed his kingdom? Why has He left the one true church to struggle forward without Him? It makes no sense. Then one day, Patrick remembers a remark his professor made on that fateful day when he revealed his mission. The old man had wondered if perhaps God suffers from doubt. Patrick remembers the words God uttered on the cross: "why hast thou forsaken me?" These words have always troubled him. Jesus was a man, but God could not doubt. Perhaps the man's doubts had infected God...

Two more years pass in preparation: If God is here now, how will Patrick find Him? He designs a box. Patrick calls the device the 'God Box.' At first the phrase amused him, but he has long since given up amusement. Essentially, the God Box is a detector, and only God's presence will set it off.

Where then shall one look for God, Patrick wonders? Would He be anywhere in the world? For a reason he can't quite explain, Patrick doubts this. He feels He must be somewhere in America—for what else explains the confusion and uncertainty gripping this country? If God is indeed in America, hiding out as it were, He must be—Patrick reasons—in a God-less place.

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Patrick begins his search in New York. For eight months he wanders the streets of the city aimlessly, carrying his God Box, stopping occasionally to point the detector into an OTB or a bar or a strip club. During those eight months, he is spat on and cursed regularly, mugged twice, and sent to the hospital once. Eventually, he leaves New York for San Francisco.

It is here where he decides to wear the hazmat suit. The suit not only shields him from the germs and filth he constantly encounters, but even better, people tend to leave him alone. He is certain God must be hiding out somewhere in San Francisco, but after twelve months, he finds no trace and decides to move on.

Las Vegas is next. He can't remember how many times he is propositioned in Las Vegas, even in the hazmat suit. In all this time, his God Detector has not made one single sound. After six months in Las Vegas, he moves on to New Orleans.

As soon as he sets eyes on Bourbon Street, the sounds of laughter and music, the alcohol, the debauchery, something in him whispers, "This is the place. Here is where I will find God."

Sure enough, on the third day, strolling past an empty bar at seven in the morning, the detector emits a short string of churlish beeps. Patrick stops and stares at his surroundings. He stands at an intersection of two drowsy streets. Opposite the bar sits an ancient, three-story structure, dark and foreboding even early in the morning. On another corner, a Catholic church mopes dejectedly beside an old oak tree, its exterior sagging under years of decay and neglect.

Now begins the final phase of his mission.

The detector chirps loudest in the area the locals refer to as 'the Quarter', and loudest of all in and around the part of Bourbon Street seldom visited by the tourists. Patrick begins parking his car in this area with the detector protruding from a partially rolled down window. He watches each pedestrian intently and listens for a signal from the Box.

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He sees Him before the detector ever begins chirping. It is nearly sunset. The man wears blue jeans, a light jacket, sandals and a baseball hat that only partly hides a head of long, shaggy, brown hair. Something about the man, his energy, his bearing, the depth of his gaze, tugs at Patrick, literally lifts him from his seat behind the steering wheel of the Camry and makes him want to follow. But he doesn't follow. He merely watches.

Patrick notices a figure slumped against a wall opposite the man. Curled up next to the slumped figure is a dog, small and brown. Patrick watches as the dog lifts its head, sniffs at the air, clambers to its feet and, limping noticeably, shuffles across the street toward the man.

When the man sees the dog, he crosses to greet the creature, bends down, strokes its fur, leans in as if listening intently, then stands and goes to the huddled figure slumped on the sidewalk. He kneels before the figure and clasps him on the shoulder. They each smile, then the man straightens and walks on, disappearing into a nearby bar. After he is gone, Patrick watches as the huddled figure rises from the sidewalk and heads off in the opposite direction. He smiles at Patrick as he passes the car. The dog, walking beside the figure, is no longer limping.

“Now, what?” Patrick wonders aloud to the empty car. He notices his hands have gripped the steering wheel and his entire body is shaking. After an exaggerated sigh, he says in a barely audible voice, “I must be sure.”

Patrick observes the man entering this same bar three nights in a row. The following morning, he jimmy's the lock on the back door of the bar and places a small listening device under a table in the center of the room. That night, he sits in his car listening.

The man is talking. Patrick is certain it's Him, the voice rhapsodic, commanding, yet somehow serene. “Beautiful women, great food, great music, what more could a man ever want?” Then later, “I'm a seeker of the truth, boys, nothing more.”

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That's when Patrick decides to kill Him. If God has now become merely a 'seeker,' He doesn't deserve to be God anymore.

Afterward, after killing God and running from the bar, Patrick sits in his idling car, curious as to what will happen next. He hears a siren in the distance, but he doesn't care. None of that matters now. All he can think about is that finally, after all this time, they can build a God-centered world and not have to worry about God butting in and ruining it all.

"Hey, Cody, get a load of that." The big man wearing a large cowboy hat indicates an approaching stranger with a jerk of his head.

Cody turns to follow his friend's gaze and sees a man wearing a scuba outfit: wet suit, tank, mask, everything except flippers. Instead, the man wears black, high-top, basketball shoes.

Cody lets out a long, low whistle punctuated by a languid stream of tobacco juice that strikes the pavement with a hiss.

"You gotta be shittin' me," he says, and then they both stare at the stranger as he walks up to them.

The stranger takes off the mask, removes the breathing tube and pulls the top of the wet suit back revealing a full head of long, shaggy, brown hair. He smiles at the two men.

"Is there an IHOP around here anywhere? I just love those blueberry pancakes."

The two men take a break from staring at the stranger and stare at each other a bit before Cody breaks the silence. "What's with the get-up, son?"

The stranger laughs, a rich full-throated laugh that seems to make the space between them come alive.

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“Yeah, I know this looks kinda weird.” He shrugs, an odd gesture nearly lost in the wet suit. “I got the idea from a guy I met down in New Orleans—wore a hazmat suit everywhere he went.” Now the three of them laugh together as if they were old friends. “Let’s just say, it keeps the crazies from getting wise to me,” then he winks at the two of them.

“If you say so,” Cowboy Hat says, and looks at Cody sideways.

“Yeah, there’s an IHOP just down the road,” Cody answers. “A few blocks, then left.”

“Great! Thanks!” The stranger starts putting his gear back on, stops in mid-motion, “You wouldn’t know where there might be some live music in town? Or a poker game?”

Cowboy Hat only stares back blankly, but Cody says, “Yeah, tonight down on Houston—just off main—the Texas Lounge. Mostly Blues, Country, that kind of thing. Don’t know about the poker game.”

“Great! Thank you kindly. Maybe I’ll see you there.”

Cody nods.

The stranger puts the scuba gear back on and walks away.

They watch him leave the parking lot and head down the street. After he’s nearly out of sight, Cowboy Hat says to Cody, “That was one crazy son-of-a-bitch.”

“Yeah, maybe so,” Cody answers, “But he seemed like a nice guy. Maybe I’ll stop by tonight.”

Cowboy Hat shakes his head, but Cody doesn’t look at him, only shoots another long stream of tobacco juice onto the grayish black pavement.