

Brandon Gets His Big Break

Chapter Five

By

John Eisenhauer

It was 2019. Amy had been working for Jane for a month. She had proven herself to be an excellent personal assistant. Hiring a new person was always a bit dicey. Jane's experience with her previous assistant proved that to be true. But things were working out well with Amy.

Jane walked into her office and pulled up her emails. While she was reviewing them, she realized that the door to her private bathroom was slightly ajar and there was a sobbing sound coming out of the room.

When she entered the lavatory, she saw Amy curled up on the floor around the toilet.

"Amy...are you alright?", Jane said gently as she stepped towards her. She sat on the toilet and looked down at her assistant:

"Are you OK, sweetie?"

Amy straightened herself up and sat on the floor: she leaned against the wall.

"Um...I'm fine. I'm sorry..."

Jane stood up and extended a hand towards Amy:

"Come on. Can you stand up?"

After helping Amy up, Jane walked her to the sink.

"Get cleaned up...okay? We'll talk. Um...everything's good."

Jane left the room and sat on the couch in her office. A moment later Amy appeared.

"I'm so sorry. That was weird and unprofessional..."

Jane smiled. She patted the couch and said:

"No worries. Have a seat...sweetie."

Amy sat down. Jane put her arm around Amy's shoulders.

"Can I get you some water? Anything..."

"No, I'm fine."

"I'm here to help. You can tell me anything."

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“There’s nothing to tell. I just weirded out. I’m sorry.”

“I care about you. You can talk to me. I’m always here for you.”

“Why? No...look I’ve been working for you for...like...a month. Now, I’m this problem employee...”

“No. I care.”

“No...you don’t. And you shouldn’t. I’m little more than a stranger.”

Amy got up and started towards the door:

“I’ve humiliated myself. Thank you for your kindness, Jane. I really appreciate everything. But I need to quit. I’m sorry to leave you high and dry. But I’ve just made a complete fool of myself. I’m sorry...”

“I watched my parents die. They were shot by a lunatic. I was six.”, Jane said.

Amy turned:

“What?”

“It was 1999. I’m Jewish...you see. Um...it was August. Anyway, my parents and I were at the [North Valley Jewish Community Center](#) in LA. Mom and pop were there to attend some activity...and...I was going to go and play in the playground area. But this crazy motherfucker opened fire with an Uzi.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“You’re right. I don’t know you...not really. But you’re hurting. And...well...I want to be here for you. But it needs to be a quid pro quo. I gotta make myself available so that you can help me. Now...what I’m telling you is something that I never talk about to anyone about. Not...my boyfriend. No one. It’s really painful. It haunts me. The only person that I talk to this about is my counselor.”

“Why...are you talking to me about this?”

“You need someone right now. And...I’m human. I’m ‘someone’. I get it...I can’t ask you to discuss your personal business...really expose yourself...unless I do so first. I need to lay myself bare for you. Then...if you wish...you can open up to me. You’d be under no obligation to say anything. Now, you can leave. I can’t stop you. And...if you want...you don’t ever need to see me again. But please let me help.”

“Well...”

“Come on, sweetie. Have a seat. Please.”, Jane said as she patted the spot on the couch next to her.

Amy sat down.

“I was six. So, the three of us were in the foyer. This guy...this fucking antisemitic freak...he just wanted to...um...kill some Jews. Apparently...and I only knew this later...this fucker was thinking of hitting a few other Jewish places. He ends up...He ends up at the community center. Mom was shot through the head and dad...the throat.”

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“Oh...Jesus Christ...”, Amy moaned.

Jane started crying and fought to get the words out:

“So...um...When the...ahh...shooting started, I freaked out. I was just a...I was...a...stupid kid. We were somewhat safe...ahh...we had taken cover behind this desk-thing...you know...that the receptionist uses. But I...shit...I bolted away from cover screaming. When my parents tried to retrieve me, they were shot.”

“Oh...fuck...fuck...”, Amy moaned.

Jane placed her elbows on her upper legs. She leaned forward and covered her face with her hands:

“I’m so wracked with guilt...ahhh...that I have to constantly work to keep from being paralyzed by these intense and overwhelming feelings of guilt. Ummm...It seems...it seems...like I’m always on the verge of crippling anxiety because of the guilt.”

Jane straightened up. She leaned over and grabbed a box of tissues from the end table. She pulled some tissues out of the box and handed the container to Amy. She wiped her face as she continued:

“Outside of my counselor, you’re the first person that I’ve spoken to about this. I can’t bring myself to talk to my boyfriend about this. My shrink is really encouraging me to...but I can’t.”

“Why...why...me?”, Amy asked as she wiped her face.

“Look, sweetie, you were on my bathroom floor having a total breakdown. And I’m a decent human being. I can’t just ignore that...I want to help. Um...I mean...that’s part of the problem. People just don’t give a fuck, and they should. I’m putting myself out there. If I don’t, you’ll leave, and I’ll never see you again. Girl...talk to me.”

Amy told her about how her mom beat her, almost killing her.

“I had to break up with Linda. My mom completely lost it. I was really afraid that she’d figure out that I had a girlfriend. I mean...she figured out that I was a lesbian but didn’t know about her. If she figured that out...I was certain that she’d kill her. I couldn’t have that.”

“And...something happened...to make you think about it...to have a PTSD.”, Jane said.

“You’re going to think that this crazy.”

“No...I won’t.”

“Do you know *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*?”

“Honey, I’m a Hollywood Agent. Are we talking the movie or the series?”

“Well...the series. Do you remember how they gave Willow a girlfriend...Tara?”

“Yeah...they introduced Tara in the season four episode...[Hush](#). It’s the series’ top rated episode on IMDb. [Amber Benson](#) played Tara.

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“Damn...”

“I’m an agent. This is like a physicist knowing algebra. Of course, it helps that I have [a photographic memory](#). Anyway, the Willow-Tara relationship was really groundbreaking...this major TV character has this gay relationship.”, Jane said.

“It totally freaked mom out. She thought the entire series was satanic. She thought that a lot of shit was satanic. But...Linda and I were really into it. I was ‘Willow’ and she was ‘Tara’.”

“Okay.”

Amy smiled as she was taken by fond memories:

“Yeah...they were...like role models...you know? We would call each other by those names.”

“Okay.”

“Anyway, this villain tries to kill Buffy but accidently shoots Tara...killing her.”

“Yeah...episode 19 of season 6...[Seeing Red](#)”

“Okay...photographic memory or not, you’re just showing off. Um...anyway...at the end of season five, Buffy dies but Osiris is able to resurrect her...you know...because the death was magical. When Tara is killed, Willow calls on Osiris to resurrect her girlfriend. He can’t because it was a natural death.”

“Okay.”

“Oh...my god...I sound like a lunatic.”

“No...you don’t.”, Jane reassured her.

“Well...I rewatched the episode where Willow tries to resurrect Tara.”

“[Villains](#).”, Jane said. “Sorry...I’ll stop.”

“Fuck...I get it. I’m impressed. Anyway, the night before I broke up with Linda. I had a dream that sort of took place in that episode. It shifted to various scenes in the episode...I was Willow. The...um...’dialogue’...was riffs on what was said in the show. So...vivid. I remember it like a real memory. For some reason...I wanted to watch it. Well...if I could watch this stupid-ass show, it would mean that I was getting better. Yeah, that triggered me. And...bam...I ended up on the floor of your head crying.”

“Okay...I want you to know you can talk to me anytime. We’re friends...not some employer-employee thing.”

“Okay...same here. You can talk to me about your shit as well.”

Jane held her arms out in the welcoming ‘wanna hug’ gesture. Amy leaned in and they hugged.

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“God...I’m so grateful that we had this talk. But there’s a ton of work to do. Are you up for it?”, Jane asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”, Amy said as she saluted.

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It was Sunday morning, the second day of the of *The 2023 Frogtown Art Walk*. Amy had left breakfast after speaking to Brandon about their relationship. She was going to do volunteer work for the community event.

Amy was in charge of supervising the setting up the risers that would line either side of Main Street, the parade route for the Art Walk. Years of unpaid labor led to unpaid managerial responsibility. Money was overrated. Not worthless but overrated. Money bought necessities, comfort and – the smarmy expression aside – happiness. Free happiness was so much better than the kind that needed to be bought.

And Amy knew that dark forces – bad people – conspired to steal the free happiness from you.

She had a special love for the Art Walk. When her mom got involved with it – and this was after the beating in the bathroom and the resultant breakup with Linda – she was so sweet, decent, *and human* if only for a short time. The Art Walk somehow pulled her mom back from the brink if only for a brief period. That brief period showed her what her childhood could have been like if only...

...if only.

The risers were a step like construction that provided graduated seating for special events. Sometimes a school would use them as a part of their football stadium.

The still folded risers were being off-loaded from a panel truck that was parked approximately a half block from the set-up location. Since they were on castors, the workers were able to push them the rest of way towards Amy.

A man, who appeared to be in his mid or late seventies and wearing a heavy linen work jumpsuit, approached her. She immediately felt a wave of pity. Pity was an uncontrollable emotion sometimes. What was inexcusable was expressing or showing it. He was simply too old for this kind of work. He should be retired or, at least, doing non-work work like one of those security guards who spent his day sitting at his assigned workstation, staring into space. More disturbing was the heavy linen work jumpsuit. It was hot out and only a heartless employer would force someone to wear one. This was especially true when the employer made an old man wear it.

When he reached Amy, he introduced himself as the supervisor.

They engaged in some small talk and then talked shop.

“And when will you be back to pick up the risers?”, she asked.

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“Well, sir...”, he started and then glanced at her perky tits. “I’m...um...sorry...”

“No, worries.”, Amy said. “But, yeah, I’m a ‘she’.”

“Yeah...right. But...honestly...I was so stupid...”

“No! You’re not! You’re fine!”

They finished up the shop talk.

“I love these community events.”, He said. “They take us back to a simpler time...a more godly time.”

She smiled and nodded.

“I understand from talking to Angie that your mom was a founding member.”, He said referring to the current CEO of the Collective.

“Yeah...that’s right.”

“I bet that she was a special lady. Good parents are so important.”

“My mom was a...force of nature. I’ll never forget her.”, Amy said with a smile. “I must make sure the vendors are setting up. Thank you, sir.”

She extended her hand. After they shook, she walked away.

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Brandon Speaking

It was about 5pm on the Sunday of the 2023 Art Walk.

Jane was at her office in Hollywood and was preparing for her meetings on Monday and had some admin odds and ends, like payroll and ordering supplies, which needed to be addressed. Also, she was working on a couple contracts for clients that had upcoming one-offs. One contract was for an episode of [Star Trek: Strange New Worlds](#) where the client would play a dancing Klingon. The other program was Kaley Cuoco's project called [Based on a True Story](#) (which was hosted by the streamer Peacock). Her client was going to play a panelist at ‘CrimeCon’ (which was an important part of the comedy thriller’s story). ‘CrimeCon’ was a real thing. I really liked it when real entities are folded into fiction. She had a bedroom adjacent to her office. When she knew that she was working late, she would tell our clan that she was going to spend the night. That was the case tonight.

Amy was helping to break down the Art Walk and then would have dinner with some of her friends from the Collective. She was expected home between 8 and 9 PM.

Jim was going to meet me for dinner at [Lucille's Smokehouse Bar-B-Que](#) at 7 PM. For my money, it was the best BBQ place around and worth the drive. We were going to talk through some of my ideas for the reimagining of *Friends*. My first day as a Staff Writer was tomorrow. I needed to get ready for the Writer’s Room that was starting at 9 AM. This was a dramedy. This project was going to be radically

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different from the original which was pretty fluffy. There was some ersatz drama ('We were on a break') but was silly by design. Ilana Glazer was going to lean heavily into psychodrama and social commentary. Having worked in other writer's rooms, I knew that I could 'bring the funny' when needed. What I was preparing was a distinct POV about the various relationships and situations. I didn't want to pitch jokes to Jim but have him help me sharpen a message. We were going to meet at about the time Amy would be getting home.

I had the place to myself. I switched on Spotify and pattered around the place. . It started to play "Good Times, Bad Times" from Led Zeppelin's first album. The soulless multi-national corporation's algorithm got me.

The song was from Zep's first album *Led Zeppelin I (LZ1)*.

That album was now viewed as one of the most important albums in the rock genre. Continuing the affinity for the blues that came to define that style in the 1960's, it expanded into an embrace of a harder sound that was the precursor of heavy metal.

When released in 1969, the reviews were bad. The infamous [Rolling Stones review](#) by John Mendelsohn said that the band offered "little that its twin, the Jeff Beck Group, didn't say as well or better three months ago ... to fill the void created by the demise of Cream, they will have to find a producer, editor and some material worthy of their collective talents." Harsh but reasonable. The review did more than just provide a rough critique: it went on to savage the album by saying that it was "trash, absolutely horrible, boring, stupid, prissy, awful."

While rock critics – like Mendelsohn – could not be omniscient, they should have seen that *LZ1* was truly innovative and groundbreaking. They were defined by their moment in pop culture. Their writing was meant to appeal to the expectations of their readers. More importantly, They wanted to satisfy the expectations of their editors – the guys who bought their columns.

I suspected that guys like Mendelsohn did not express their honest opinions. He was controlled by external forces. As a result, he denied his authentic self.

He was told by the editors that they wanted the music reviews to have strong opinions about the cultural value of the album. [Rolling Stone's founder, Jann Wenner, wanted the magazine's reviews to have seriousness and focus.](#) Wenner felt that the emerging world of rock criticism was often about image, culture, and politics, not always the music itself.

The cut 'Black Mountain Side' was a frickin' tour de force, an acoustic guitar piece that showcased Jimmy Page's virtuosity and versatility.

Songs like 'Communication Breakdown' and 'Immigrant Song' constituted a clear new direction, a potential new genre.

A couple years after the *LZ1*'s release, Black Sabbath released its self-title debut. Sabbath modified its fledgling sound because of the influence of Zep.

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Led Zeppelin's first two albums were so revolutionary that they made Black Sabbath completely change their sound. Sabbath singer Ozzy Osbourne said "[When I heard the first two Zeppelin albums, I thought they were fucking unbelievably good. I told Tony \(Iommi\), 'They're fucking heavy'. He said, 'We'll be heavier,' and he fucking was right.](#)".

Sabbath eschewed the blues influence and embraced the energy of Zep's heavier tracks (and went further). But, in an attempt to differentiate itself from Zep, it crafted a unique sound that would later be described as 'goth'. So, this revolution was not simply an attempt to mimic the heavy sound of isolated Zep tracks but to create a whole new sound. This innovative style continued to mutate as it continued to react to what came before. The glam metal sound of 80's groups which included acts like *Poison* and *Ratt* was another iteration: this time the heaviness took an oddly commercial direction by integrating the theatrics of *The New York Dolls* with the perceived angst of suburban white boys.

While I was blessed with 20/20 hindsight, I was certain that the critics of that time had to have seen how groundbreaking Zep's early albums were. I was certain that they were denying their honest instincts to please others.

I flipped off Spotify and flipped on an episode of the amazing sci-fi series *Babylon 5*.

The episode was called [Revelations](#). In this episode, a character named G'Kar recited a poem by the poet Kahil Gibran and then [delivered a monologue](#) about God. He used the metaphor of shining a light on a cave wall to explain how the more intense the search for God, the brighter the light on the wall, and the greater the sense of revelation upon seeing it. He also explains that what we perceive as God is the byproduct of our search for God.

As I watched G'kar's monologue, I thought about my opinion about the search for God (or – at least – deeper meaning). Before I talk about that, here's some background on the story.

At the outset of the series, G'kar is an ambassador on Babylon 5: he is representing his people, the Narn. In the first episode, the Narn attack and slaughter a farming colony on a planet that is currently occupied by another alien race called the Centauri. The two are bitter enemies. A couple centuries earlier, the Centauri occupied the Narn home world and committed mass genocide. The Narn claims the farming colony planet as their own. Fast forward, the Centauri invades the Narn home world a second time. They commit another round of genocide, dissolve the Narn government and set up a puppet regime.

The Centauri Ambassador – who now claims to represent both planets – strips G'kar of his ambassadorship. He tries to get G'kar extradited to be tried for crimes. The military administration of Babylon 5 closes ranks with the remaining ambassadors of the other alien worlds to give G'kar sanctuary on the station. Over time, he becomes a messianic figure to the Narn and a leader in the resistance. Initially, as an ambassador, he is a scheming and Machiavellian type. As a spiritual leader in the resistance, he comes to be more circumspect.

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In that season 2 episode, he opined about God (or the search for deeper meaning). That which a person perceives as God (or deeper meaning) is the byproduct of that person's search for God (or deeper meaning).

God is the search for absolute knowledge. If a person searches without bias or prejudice, that person can unearth great truths, transcendental understanding. What motivates this search? It does not develop technology that improves the quality of life. It does not develop medicine that extends life. The search for transcendent truth doesn't do shit...at least in the temporal sense. A very credible case can be made that God exists to give the powerful the justification to dominate the weak. And that – for the powerful – is a temporal benefit. In fact, the most common god concepts are either a cynical grab for power or an attempt to assuage the pain of failure. There is no temporal benefit in a search for meaning in that does not provide power or wealth. It could be said that a seeker seeks for the psychological benefit. But why does that need exist? A person who has every need fulfilled will still search for transcendent truth. If a person is simply a physical being, why would such a person care about transcendent truth if all physical needs are being met?

According to a philosophy called Phenomenalism, there are no absolute truths because human knowledge cannot transcend the subjective limitations imposed by the endless distortions imposed by reality. Absolute truth, truth about objective reality, is therefore out of reach and we must content ourselves with relative truth—that is, truth about mere phenomena.

Phenomenalism suggests that a person can only have a subjective understanding of absolute reality.

According to Philosophical Taoism, which predates the explicitly metaphysical form, absolute truth – or complete falsehood – cannot be embraced by a person. A person is a smaller part of the larger whole. When examining something, any conclusion will contain both truth and falsehoods.

[The Chaung Tzu could be interpreted to say](#) that the physical world's endless distinctions distort reality (or the individual's perception of it). However, if all distinctions are relative to some perspective, then, we have no basis to conclude anything about absolute reality. We have no rational access to a perspective that has no distinctions. It is important to point out that Taoism also argues that a person has a true nature. The true nature of a person is to return to a natural way of life (unencumbered by complicated social institutions and intellectual ideas). Doing so, Taoism suggests, will return a person to a state of natural grace - Tao.

While I do quibble with some of that, I do believe that a person does have an authentic self. I cannot prove this with scientific certainty.

I accept that scientific knowledge is – in the context of our reality – is as close to 'absolute truth' as humanity can hope for. Everything that I have said is about the speculation about things that cannot be measured. From this perspective, anyone stating that they have an inerrant understanding of something beyond measure is full of shit.

While very greatly chastened by the aforementioned analysis, I have reached conclusions about the unknowable. I cannot say that I am certain about my conclusions – because the value of this sort of

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thing is hopelessly corrupted – I still really felt that ‘I’m onto something’. That’s statement is sloppy philosophy: I don’t care.

I am a panentheist. Panentheism is a view that God is both in and beyond the universe, unlike pantheism (God is all) or theism (God is separate). The former is the idea that nature is God (or – at least – deserves the level of reverence given a deity). The latter is the view of dominant Christianity or Islam. It views God as being separate from physical reality and has human qualities (emotions and motivations).

As a panentheist, I believe that God is the totality of physical reality and a force that drives physical reality. God is Unknowable. That means it cannot be defined. So, when I called God ‘a force that guides physical reality’, I contradicted myself. That’s fine. My belief structures my appreciation of knowledge. It is a form of understanding that is distinct from knowledge and functions by different rules.

My belief is speculative. I own that. But I like the speculation. I reject the mania that all opinions must be provable and the delusion that proof does not matter.

This opinion was enhanced by my partner Jane.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan believed that God is not a personal being but rather a force or process that is present in the universe. He believed that God is the sum of all natural processes that allow life to exist and flourish.

While there are some similarities between the God of Reconstructionist Judaism and my God, such as the idea that there is a higher power or force that guides reality, there are also significant differences. The Reconstructionist conception of God is totally abstract yet somehow personal. My God (The Tao) is totally abstract and impersonal.

By reflecting on God - totally abstract and impersonal – I affirm that the Universe has unity and structure. Through this ongoing process of affirmation and reaffirmation – that there is a level to Existence beyond measure – my perceived worth is deepened. This cannot be logically defended but is true.

My belief in God or *The Tao* is an affirmation of a structure to reality that is unknowable to the human mind. I try to say as little as possible about it. I do believe that this unity does exist. If that unity did not exist, I would not. The more that a person elaborates on this: the more wrong they become. Any claim of inerrancy is bullshit.

Speculative understanding is corrupted by the endless input of a person’s external reality. Often, the people that interact with someone – either directly or indirectly – consciously work to undermine that person’s *free and responsible search for truth and meaning*.

Remember the bad review that *Rolling Stone Magazine* gave *Led Zeppelin’s* first album in 1969? I feel that the critic was so dogged by the demands of others (like the editor Jann Wenner) that he either

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suppressed his true opinion or his opinion was modified by that pressure. The latter possibility validates my belief that a person has an authentic self. Regardless, inerrancy of belief is an absurd concept.

The *Babylon 5* character G'kar argued that what someone perceived as God is the byproduct of his or hers search for God. Maybe all that matters is that your beliefs make you happy and cause you to be good to others. Because if people are not good to each other, our society goes to shit. And if our society goes to shit, no one is happy.

I left to meet Jim at the BBQ place.

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It was 2008.

Amy had become withdrawn before the beginning of the Seventh Grade.

She was going to attend *James Jordan Middle School*. Before the seventh-grade term started, her mom was called into a meeting that was arranged by the counselor at 'James Jordan' – Dr. Greene. He was concerned about Amy's file.

"Her grades are fine.", Her mother, Doris, said flatly as she entered Greene's office. "The Seventh Grade hasn't even started yet. I can't believe that you called me in."

Normally, it was protocol – and common sense – to start off with some small talk even if it was something as banal as the weather. This would create a bond between counselor and parent. It would create a shared interest – while very tenuous – other than the child. Dr. Greene looked into the woman's eyes and saw naked hostility and hatred. Those feelings were directed at him. He surmised that she greatly resented both him and this meeting. Besides, the notes in Amy's file – that detailed her mom's past interactions with Amy's sixth grade teachers – underscored the contempt that the woman had for daughter's new school.

This was a public charter school with an excellent academic reputation: Initially, she was proud of her daughter for being accepted. Still, because of her mistrust of elitist educational institutions based on the premise that they were satanic machinations, she had misgivings to say the least. She begrudgingly allowed Amy to attend.

While she initially supported having Amy attend 'James Jordan', she quickly came to regret it.

Dr. Greene had been reviewing Amy's file and the feedback from her sixth-grade teachers. The notes pointed out that the woman was fond of saying that the entire thing (public school in general and 'James Jordan' specifically) was one of Satan's machinations. Amy was committed to 'James Jordan' and her mom was unhappy. In fact, when speaking to Amy's sixth grade counselors, Doris used the phrase 'satanic machination' several times when talking about 'James Jordan'. She seemed to feel that Dark Forces backed her into a commitment with the respected charter middle school. The phrase was

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embedded in quotation marks, indicating that she used that expression verbatim. A doctorate in Psychology was not needed to make Greene realize that this was going to be an unpleasant encounter.

It was best to get down to business.

“No, ma’am, this is not about her grades.”

“You can call me Doris.”

“Oh...well...thank you! Now, Doris...”

“It doesn't matter because it doesn't matter what you call me. That doesn't matter because you don't.”

“I see.”, Dr. Greene said making a conscious effort to maintain a calm and breezy tone. He extended his hand, palm up, pointing at the chair that was in front of his desk. “Please, have a...”

“I'll stand...thank you.”, Doris said curtly as she crossed her beefy arms across her ample chest.

“Okay...”

“Did her previous school say that Amy was fighting? Being disruptive? Was she being picked on?”

“No...nothing like that.”

“Is my Amy doing anything?”

“No. But we have reason to be concerned about her emotional wellbeing...”

Doris turned and walked out.

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After Jane witnessed the violent murder of her parents by an antisemitic terrorist at a Jewish Community Center in 1999, she was taken in by Miriam, her mom's sister, and Miriam's husband Douglas. Miriam and Douglas were Reconstructionist Jews, as were Jane's parents. This continuity of thought and belief was a blessing for the six-year-old as she began dealing with a profound life-shattering event.

Jane's family sat [Shiva](#) for her parents. This was a Jewish mourning custom that took seven days. Afterward, Miriam and Douglas took the orphaned girl to their home which was also in LA.

Miriam and Douglas had known the child since her birth. She was a vibrant and happy child. After the tragedy, she was quiet and withdrawn. It required effort to get anything out of her. They were very concerned about the young girl's lack of emotions. She was always such a happy child and now she spoke in a constant monotone. Prior to the tragedy, she was a very open and trusting girl: now she was distant. She seemed unable to connect with them. The Child Psychiatrist that was treating Jane warned them that the child's flat emotional affect [could persist into adulthood](#). More profound problems – such as an attachment problem that makes it difficult to get too close for fear of abandonment – could also

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persist into adulthood: however, the nature and intensity of such problems vary from individual to individual. The therapist speculated that Jane might find [helping others](#) to be therapeutic.

As Jane grew into adulthood, she understood the intense challenges that she faced. She came to embrace her Reconstructionist faith as it provided a conception of God that was of value. She also resonated with other [modern Judaic conceptions of God](#).

To believe in God means to accept life on the assumption that it harbors conditions in the outer world and drives in the human spirit which together impel man to transcend himself. To believe in God means to take for granted that it is man's destiny to rise above the brute and to eliminate all forms of violence and exploitation from human society. In brief, God is the Power in the cosmos that gives human life the direction that enables the human being to reflect the image of God.

- Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan

[The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion \(1962\)](#)

Like many, she struggled with the meaning (or non-meaning) of God. She came to the realization – actually she just read what the founder of her preferred school of Judaism thought – that God was not an anthropomorphic being or a supernatural agency. Instead, She was transcendent. Separate from human understanding, She was the force that allowed a person to realize her potential by embracing the Power of the Cosmos. The anthropomorphic being – this guy with a personality (and not a pleasant one) and motivations (and not decent ones) – was simply made up. She did believe in God and her belief was passionate.

As an aside, she liked the [Marcia Falk take](#) on the feminine imagery of God. Falk created new blessings that used feminine imagery to describe God's attributes and actions, such as *wellspring of life* or *source of blessing* and avoided anthropomorphic patriarchal images of God, such as *father* or *king*. Falk found that to be exclusionary and incompatible with modern beliefs. For that reason, drew much of her imagery from the natural world: she felt that reflected her feminist spiritual vision and her connection with creation.

While feminine imagery when thinking about the Divine – and Kaplan preferred that word to 'God' - simply worked for her, she knew that her conception of God had nothing to do with pronouns. She was down with Kaplan's theology – the basis of Reconstructionist Judaism that went so far as to say that God is neither a personal nor conscious being. God could neither relate to nor communicate with humanity in any way.

She appreciated that Kaplan's naturalistic theology was a variant of John Dewey's philosophy. Dewey's naturalism combined atheism with religious terminology. This was done to create a philosophy that satisfied the desire for religiosity among those who lost faith in traditional religion. In contrast, Kaplan's theology held that in light of the advances in philosophy, science, and history, it would be impossible for modern Jews to continue to adhere to many of Judaism's traditional theological claims.

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Kaplan developed the idea of 'transnaturalism'. In his book *The Meaning Of God In The Modern Jewish Religion* he wrote:

Transnaturalism is that extension of naturalism which takes into account much that mechanistic or materialistic or positivistic science is incapable of dealing with. Transnaturalism reaches out into the domain where mind, personality, purpose, ideals, values and meanings dwell. It treats of the good and the true. Whether or not it has a distinct logic of its own is problematic. But it certainly has a language of its own, the language of simile, metaphor and poetry. That is the language of symbol, myth and drama. In that universe of discourse, belief in God spells trust in life and man, as capable of transcending the potentialities of evil that inhere in his animal heredity, in his social heritage, and in the conditions of his environment. Transnaturalist religion beholds God in the fulfillment of human nature and not in the suspension of the natural order. Its function is not to help man overcome the hazards of nature, but to enable him to bring under control his inhumanity to his fellow man.

Put more simply, the universe is an integrated whole: God is the sum of all natural processes that allow people to become self-fulfilled. Kaplan's theology defines God as the creative life of the universe, which is neither a personal nor conscious being and cannot relate to or communicate with humanity in any way.

Jane understood why Transnaturalism pissed off both atheists and theists.

God is not a supernatural being, but rather a force that is present in the natural world.

Theists hate it because it challenges the traditional notion of God as a supernatural being who created the universe. That's just not cricket. The word 'God' simply must denote a transcendent Being who created the universe. It must! It must! It must!

And atheists?

Well, they just think it's really smarmy. It just repurposes the word 'God' in a different form. And there is no evidence to support the existence of God in any form. Transnaturalism is just another attempt to reconcile religion with science (apparently a bad thing).

Jane felt that both groups totally missed the point. The Universe is a wondrous thing and is defined by structure and unity. This requires no evidence. By defining it as God or the Divine – or stating that God is a force that drives it – several things are accomplished.

While science is of indescribable worth, the recognition of God – from a Transnatural perspective – acknowledges that a full understanding of reality is beyond the realm of human comprehension. To be blunt, this scares the shit out of many who call themselves 'atheist'. Embrace of God, as described here, is an acknowledgment of human limitations.

While literal belief in a 'story god' – Jesus, Zues, Allah, Odin, Yahweh – is indescribably stupid in the modern age, belief in a Transnatural God is simply a full embrace – without hesitation, equivocation, or shame – of the wonder of being. God cannot be uncovered by rational thought. This does not diminish the intellect but acknowledges it's limitations.

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Jane knew that – as a Jew – her identity was tied to her ancestry. Her ancestry was defined by a belief in God. An aware Jew could just be secular but that retards the experience. Her belief in God – from the Transnatural perspective – allowed her to retain her past in all of its richness. Making the *wonder of being* central to her life – without the tedious need to explain every frickin’ aspect of that wonder – allowed her to pursue a life that is defined by profound gratitude. Her culture – the holy days, scriptures, and commentary – take on a relevance that’s not marred by guilt or doubt. Belief in a Transnatural God allowed her to commune with likeminded people based on an on-going affirmation of the miracle of existence.

It is also worth pointing out that such a take on God allowed her to say ‘God bless you’ when someone sneezed without having an existential crisis.

Jane was tormented by both the murder of her parents and her fear of antisemitism. Her belief in God and her participation in a like-minded temple greatly mitigated the intensity of the fear and guilt. It greatly facilitated the healing process.

Getting a bit more granular, she knew that she benefited psychologically and emotionally by helping others. By making that activity an affirmation of God – a [mitzvah](#) – it enhanced the psychological benefit and made it spiritually meaningful (the two are one in the same). While the Halacha (or Judaic law) is [not controlling from a Reconstructionist perspective](#), Jane felt that she reaffirmed her gratitude for existing – and acknowledged her debt to God – by helping others. The word ‘mitzvah’ (Hebrew for Commandment) is often [related](#) to the Aramaic word ‘tzavta’ (companionship or personal attachment). Jane felt that a mitzvah deepened her relationship to God by strengthening an essential bond to Her. She believed that God was a force that inspired her to transcend her limitations – her guilt over her parents’ murder and her fear over the possible rise of fascism – by striving for a better world. She felt that doing good – be it a mitzvah (which benefitted an individual) or [tikkun olam](#) (which benefitted the society or the world) – highlighted her role in creating a just and peaceful society. Besides reaffirming that she was a good person, it improved her mental health.

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It was August 15th 2008. It was the first day of Amy’s seventh grade term: which lasted four months.

Biology was second period. Amy was looking forward to it. She loved science and stuff like anatomy just spoke to her. In it, she saw God’s wondrous handiwork. It was a different God then that of her mom and her church. She stopped believing in that god...

...Subconsciously.

Consciously, she embraced the teachings of her mom and her church with greater passion. And she was tormented by her budding sexual desires. Was she disappointing the LORD or was the LORD disappointed in her?

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Her thirteen-year-old self didn't think these thoughts with the certitude of fanaticism. These thoughts were cold and dispassionate, a coldness that would give way to fear and confusion. Then the panic would close in on her. And she would be alone.

Her conscious, and tormented, ruminations were dry but gave rise to emotions that were drowning her. Her conscious thoughts were checked by her subconscious understanding. In the dark recess of her mind sat an appreciation that had not yet taken form:

It was all bullshit.

The process of moving that appreciation from the subconscious to conscious was about to begin with her first day of second period Biology.

Amy went to [James Jordan Middle School](#) in Reseda, California. This was a public charter school with an excellent academic reputation: it accepted students – that met academic criteria – using a lottery system. Amy's teachers were so impressed by her smarts that they pushed her to apply: she was accepted. Her mom had mixed feelings about this. She felt that academics was simply another machination of Satan. The only valid forms of study, Doris felt, was the exploration of the Word of God or vocational training. Nonetheless, she was proud of her daughter and begrudgingly decided to allow her to attend.

Her biology class was being taught in one of the laboratory classrooms. The teaching station was at the front of the room. Radiating away from it, towards the back of the room, were rows of peninsula-like workstations. Each row consisted of three of these oblong stations: the elongated permanent structures - that were like tables - were separated by aisles that allowed easy access to the teaching station. Each workstation was topped in obsidian marble (actually, an amazing facsimile). At either end of each workstation, was a stainless-steel sink with an unusually deep basin. Each sink had a gooseneck faucet. It was tall and the spout was shaped like an inverted "U". Because of the high clearance, it was easy to fill a large beaker. Should someone get a corrosive chemical on their skin, the flexible neck of the faucet could be bent, and the opening could be pointed at the person. The water stream could be narrowed and used to blast the affected area.

Amy smiled broadly as she entered the room. Science and math took her out of her often-overwhelming depression. She was aware that depressed kids were supposed to lose interest in their studies. It was the opposite with her. Studying made her forget the oppressive dictates of her mom and her Church (as laid out by her Pastor...her Shepherd). Her mom had mixed feelings about this. She felt that academics was simply another machination of Satan. The only valid forms of study, Doris felt, was the exploration of the Word of God or vocational training. When Amy was studying, however, Doris knew where she was. She was quiet and not getting into trouble. The child was not doing drugs or fornicating with boys. At this point, Doris did not suspect deviance: that was going to become an issue soon enough.

Amy loved all of her subjects and dreamt of college and a career. She never thought about *James 1:8* and its warning. She did not think about what her Pastor...her Shepherd once said. A person trying to embrace both the way of the church and the world was torn. He was just enough of the world to know

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that he couldn't be happy in the church and with just enough Christ in him to know that he couldn't be happy in the world. Such a person is a spiritual schizophrenic...a two-soul person.

And he was right about that. Academics took her out of her conscious emotional torture and moved her into what her subconscious understood (but could not yet articulate).

She put her book bag on top of one of the lab workstations and sat on a metal shop stool. Looking to her left, she saw her. She was a very pretty girl, blond and petite. Amy's enthusiasm evaporated and was replaced by self-conscious nerves.

"Hi! My name is Linda! So cool to meet you!"

"Um...hi. My name's Amy", she said with forced nonchalance.

Linda smiled.

Mr. Leeper, the biology teacher, began to speak. After his introductory remarks and passing out the syllabus for the semester, he said:

"Okay, guys. This is the first day and there will be no lecture. There is just one bit of business. I want you guys to buddy up. The two of you will be partners for the entire semester. We are going to have you work on all kinds of lab projects together. But, if you're smart...and I know that you are...you guys will meet outside of class and study. So...pair up guys!"

Linda glanced in both directions. Except for Amy, there was no other student near her. The girl was a little strange. But Linda went with her gut. This girl seemed bright and should be fine. Besides, the people that were even remotely close were academically worthless. This guy was a stoner. That girl was a total bubble-brain. Even though she was only thirteen, she was already looking forward to getting into a good college. Her mom was a Unitarian minister and dad a social worker. She was eager to follow in their footsteps. Her ambition was to earn a PsyD degree and be a clinical psychologist. Her folks were very supportive of this goal. If she realized that they were going to partner up, she would have made plans with one of the students that she knew to be smart.

"So...do you want to be my partner?", Linda said brightly.

"Okay...sure.", Amy said nervously.

Linda's parents encouraged her to give a person an opportunity to open up. You never knew what someone might be dealing with. It was true that the average person would bolt. This 'Amy' clearly had issues. Mom and dad were both humanists and taught her to look for the inherent worth in a person.

"So...here's the deal.", Linda said. "If we partner up, we'll have to meet outside class to study. Are you cool with that?"

"Sure...I guess."

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“Seriously...I’m already thinking about getting into a good college. So, I take studying seriously. Do you feel the same way?”

Amy was taken back. Linda was sweet and kind. She came off as thoughtful. This made her different from every other kid. The truth was that the others could not get away from her fast enough. She actually felt herself relax...just enough to talk comfortably. And she couldn’t believe that she was sitting next to someone who cared about school.

“I’d like that.”

Before Mr. Leeper silenced the room, they were able to make plans to meet after school that afternoon.

“I’m sorry if I’m coming off like a nerd but I want to make put together a game plan...you know, an ongoing study schedule.”, Linda said.

“I’d like that!”, Amy enthused.

Over the next several weeks, the two bonded. Both enjoyed studying – which was an act of pure rebellion in Amy’s case – and simply got on.

As for Linda, she also became very close to Amy very quickly. Unlike Amy, she did connect to the popular kids: she was a cheerleader. Linda, being a normal kid, needed friends. However, she never liked her friends. She thought they were vapid and superficial. Her IQ would crater whenever she hung out with them. She could talk about art and books with Amy: she was fascinated by the fact that Amy felt that caring about such things – enjoying them – was an act of rebellion. When talking about J.R.R Tolkien’s *Lord Of The Rings* books, Amy confided that she hid them from her mom in the same way that a horny boy would hide porno magazines.

It bothered Linda greatly that she had to make excuses to the other kids about the time that she spent with Amy (“She’s my study partner: I need her to get good grades!”). When, in fact, Amy was the only one that she liked.

She was also sexually attracted to Amy but didn’t know what to do about it. Amy came from a pretty repressive church. Linda realized that did not mean that Amy could not be gay. But, even if she had those feelings, she would probably be having a hard time handling them. The truly weird part was that Amy was the only girl that she could come out to. Even if some of her other friends were gay, there was no way to tell. This was 2008 and being a gay kid was shameful. If she hit on any of her friends and things went badly, she would be ostracized. If she hit on Amy and things went south, it wouldn’t matter from the perspective of her social life. She was a total outsider. That was harsh: that was reality.

Amy was not sure if she could call Linda a friend: but she knew that this was the first kid that she felt comfortable around. She was not a total hermit. Mom encouraged her to socialize with the other children in the Church. Mom taught her to distrust someone unless that person was right with Jesus: this contributed to her difficulty with socializing at school. But Amy did not like the church kids. Every single kid was a *Stepford Wife*: she doubted that a single one of them ever had an original thought...ever. She would socialize at church events, and doing that made mom happy, but she detested

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it. She also had sexual feelings for Linda. The problem was not a fear of rejection, or how it would affect her social standing, but the enforced belief that those feelings were evil.

This created a situation where someone had to act or both would be miserable. That kind of sexual tension – forbidden lust – had to be resolved. If not, the tension would destroy the friendship. And, in different ways, each viewed the other as her only friend.

One day, Linda palmed the underside of Amy’s chin with both hands and steadied her face. She kissed her on the lips. It was an awkward and unskilled kiss: but it was lengthy and firm. She sat back to gauge her reaction. For a moment, Amy looked down and refused to make eye contact. Then she looked her friend in the eyes. Her face beet red, she kissed her on the cheek. After a nervous pause, she gently – tentatively – kissed Linda on the lips.

Amy moved away from Linda somewhat. Looking down, careful not to look Linda in the eyes, she placed a hand on her friend’s shoulder and giggled nervously. Amy then dropped her hand and touched Linda’s breast. Still not making eye contact, she dropped her hand towards her friend’s crotch. Her pinky finger made contact. She froze and her facial expression was one of consternation. Then she moved her hand laterally. After momentarily pressing her palm against the side of Linda’s buttock, she ran her hand up and down the side of her upper leg. She straightened up fully and watched Linda for her reaction: the girl smiled.

“I have to go but I’ll talk to you later.”, Amy said with nervous flirtation.

Amy smiled awkwardly and got up to leave. She was unsteady and afraid that she would lose her balance. After taking a deep breath and exhaling through her mouth, she regained sufficient strength to walk. Amy turned and started away.

And she thought:

I guess we are friends.

From behind her, she heard:

“I’ll talk to you later, sweetie.”

Amy stopped and – without turning around – said:

“Okay...sweetie.”

And Amy continued to walk away.

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