

The Great Jump-Off

"And that," the old man pointed to the next photograph in the album, "that is your great-grand-aunt Carol." The little girl tucked in beside him on the rocking chair looked carefully at the picture.

"Now there's a person you would've liked, Larah", the young man sitting across the room said.

"Is ze dead now?"

"Yes, she is." She accepted it in the same way she accepted sunsets.

"Was ze your sibling?" she asked.

The old man noticed then her easy use of non-gender-specific words. The first time, he thought she was just slurring the pronunciation--but 'sibling' was loud and clear. He'd managed to get used to 'chair' instead of 'chairman' and 'firefighter' instead of 'fireman', but not much more. The massive language overhaul had occurred when he was past fifty. And, like his parents who used 'miles per hour' and 'pounds per square inch' until the day they died, he figured he'd be saying 'he' and 'she' and 'his' and 'hers' till the day *he* died. Though he *had* managed to quit smoking.

"Great-grand-za?" He felt her tiny hand on his cheek--he must've appeared to be dozing.

"Yes--yes she was. My sibling. She was Carol Sagan." He smiled at the memory.

"Have you told Jeth about the Great Jump-Off?" It was a scratchy voice.

"No--" the young man turned to the other person sitting in the sun room. A friend

of his grand-za. He turned back then, curious. "What was 'The Great Jump-Off'?"

"Was it a game?" the little girl asked. It was the hope of all puppies.

"No", he smiled, "it was much more serious than a game. Do you know what religion is?" Larah shook her head. "Well, it used to be that a lot of people believed in something they called 'God'. Something they could never see or touch or--"

"Like 'Santa Claus'? Kids used to believe in Santa Claus. They said he was an old man with a white beard and if you were good he gave you a reward at the end of the year."

"No easter bunny either?" he looked sadly over her head to his grandson.

Jeth shook his head. "But that's not to say there are no surprises in her life. Every now and then she gets a secret gift, or gives one."

"But the magic--"

"There's enough *real* magic in the world, grand-za. Right now it's fireflies. Two months ago it was prisms. Before that, bubbles."

Larah tugged at her great-grand-father's sleeve. She hadn't followed that part of their conversation. "So was God like Santa Claus?"

"Yes--actually God was a lot like Santa Claus--a Santa Claus for adults, who didn't want to grow up", he added to himself.

"So when did they all jump off?" Grand-za laughed. That was well-put, he thought.

"Well, first there was the 'Face-Off'. That's an old television show your great-grand-aunt appeared on from time to time. It was sort of a one-on-one debate/discussion of important ideas and issues."

"All quiet on the set, please."

Ayn Randall focussed on the camera. She was relaxed with confidence, excited with anticipation. This was going to be a good show--one of the best, she thought, in her five years as host.

Sitting on one side of the table was Carol Sagan. She knew Carol from university. They had both studied philosophy. Carol was perfect for 'Face-Off': articulate in a clear and simple way, fearless but not vicious, intensely passionate but not fanatic.

Facing her was Marion Eplett. She was a strong woman, firm in her views, reasonably intelligent, and very representative of 'the people at large'.

Carol represented the atheist/humanist view--though of course the name for it had disappeared at a rate in direct proportion to its rise in popularity. Marion was a theist: it was a word heard more and more, where before she'd be called--when called anything--a Catholic or a United, a Jew--whatever.

The face-off, Ayn thought, was going to be between knowledge and belief, reason and faith.

"Welcome to this week's 'Face-Off'" Ayn said suddenly, on cue. "This week on our show we have--" It took only a moment to introduce the participants. Carol began immediately.

"Why do you believe in a god as the creator of the universe and not, for instance, a purple platypus?"

"Well, because that's ridiculous--to believe in a purple platypus doesn't make--"

Marion stopped.

"It doesn't make sense? But belief is independent of reason. What does it matter if it makes sense or not? I can list a thousand things you believe that don't make sense."

Ayn repress the impulse to smile. "So, again, why don't you believe that 'The Purple Platypus' created the world?"

"Well because it's just not true. God--"

"Not *true*? So you're *not* talking faith, you're talking *knowledge*? You *know*? You can *prove* 'God' exists then?"

"Oh yes!" Marion said with relief. "Theologians have been proving God's existence for ages! For example, everything must come from *somewhere*--"

"Who says so?" Ayn leaned back then--they were off and running and would need no assistance.

"Well--logic, I guess--"

"Reason?"

"Yes--okay--reason", she said cautiously. "And that's the basis of proof for God's existence. He's the something that created everything", she finished uncertainly.

"And who created God?"

"No one. He's omnipotent. He created himself."

"So you suspend the very logic that got you to God to explain God: everything has a cause, therefore God--but then suddenly everything doesn't have to have a cause, therefore God!"

"Is that a problem?"

"It's inconsistent, it's illogical!"

"God is exempt from the paltry human rules of logic. He transcends reason!"

"But it's not *him* that's transcending it, it's *you!* *You're* the one who's saying 'now I'll use logic, now I won't'. That's why your 'proof' is invalid--it's unreasonable."

"But as I said, and Kierkegaard will back me up on this--it doesn't *have* to be reasonable."

"Then why not believe in The Purple Platypus instead?"

"What?"

"Why isn't The Purple Platypus the being that created everything including itself?"

"Well, I suppose God could take the form of a purple platypus--but there's no support for the existence of any 'purple platypus'."

"There is for God's?"

"Oh yes--we have reason to believe--"

"So you're going to use your reason again? You seem to use it when it pleases you and toss it out when it leads to an unfavourable conclusion," Carol's tone was not as cruel as it could have been.

Marion ignored her. "*The Bible*, the Dead Sea Scrolls, relics, first person testimonies--"

"*The Bible?* What about the contradictions in *The Bible?*"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Well, how do you decide which stories to believe--when there are two?"

"Such as?"

"Genesis, for starters. There are two versions about the creation of man and

woman. Which do you believe and why?" Marion was silent.

"And what about the Apocrypha--all the stories that were decided by somebody at some time to be left out. There's one that says God has no gender. Why do you believe the 'He' version instead?"

"Well, I'm sure there was good reason to omit--" she trailed off. "Look I'm not saying there aren't weak spots in my faith. But surely it's better to believe in something than in nothing at all! Are *you* saying it's better to be *pagans!*"

"That's interesting," Carol commented, "You use the word 'pagan' to suggest someone primitive, someone unenlightened. I use the word 'Christian' in the same way. However," she went on, "you misunderstand. I'm not saying I believe in nothing. I-- maybe I am," she retracted. "I don't need to *believe* in anything, because I *know*. I believe, if you will, in knowledge, in reason."

"But a godless world? I can't imagine--!" Marion was horrified.

"I can." It was said simply, without apology.

"Well", Ayn broke in with impeccable timing, "we'll take a commercial break now, but we'll be right back", she smiled at the camera. She offered glasses of water to her two guests; the intermission was brief and silent.

"But don't you see?" Marion was eager to resume, as soon as the break was over, "With no sense of right or wrong--"

"Theists don't have a monopoly on morality" Carol interrupted. "Ethics do not have to depend on a god."

"Well without God, how would you know what's right and wrong?"

"*We* would determine that?"

"On what basis?"

"How about justice? 'It is good to treat everyone equally.'" Of course it wasn't that easy, Carol knew. 'Justice' would have to be defined; and to treat everyone 'equally' may not be 'just'. But if Marion didn't want to pursue that aspect--

"And what's to stop someone from being bad?"

"What stops them now--the fear of God's punishment?"

"Well--"

"Do you mean to say that the only reason you're good is because you want to get to heaven? Isn't that, by your *own* standards, selfish?"

Marion paused for a moment. Then she asked triumphantly, "Can *you* sit there and tell me right now what's just?"

"No", Carol admitted calmly. "It's not that black and white. If you want simple answers, go back to your catechism. The world is full of grey complexities--but as Intelligent and sensitive adults I think we can arrive at the answers we need."

"What about Sundays?" Marion changed the topic. "You'll be taking away family time--don't you believe in the sanctity of the family?"

Carol stared at her blankly. The connections weren't logical, so it took a while for her to see them.

"Well," she said after a moment, "you're forgetting about flextime. Parents can simply choose a workshift that parallels their kids' school shift. But surely that's--"

"And are you advocating a world without prayers?" Marion had interpreted Carol's slowness as a sign that victory was near--she intensified her questioning.

"Prayers?! *Yes* I'm advocating a world without prayers! It's easy to talk to a god

that doesn't talk back. But it's more effective to talk to the people you share life with."

"And what about the children?"

"What about them?" Carol asked. "I'd like to read something a student in school wrote the other day. It's sort of an alternative prayer: 'Act of Love: I love myself. Out of this love comes careful nurturance of my self, with passionate thought and rational feeling, toward the fullest, richest human being I can become--who is then able and willing to love others in the same way.' Here's another: 'Act of Faith:'", she smiled at the word, "I firmly believe in the value of my self. I believe that what I do has had, has now, and will have a positive effect on others--I believe that my life is not in vain. And I believe in freedom, responsibility, and joy--for all."

"Who will you turn to for guidance in this heathen world of yours?" Ayn considered intercepting--Marion had stopped responding to Carol, forcing the two-way discussion to become a one-sided question and answer session. It was a common power play that she didn't allow.

"To my self--my reason--and to that of others I deem deserving."

"And you deem mere mortals to be more deserving of your trust than God?"

"Yes, I do. To trust in God shows pretty poor self-esteem, don't you think? Why can't *we* just *figure out* what's in our best interests? Look at all the remarkable--dare I say miraculous--things we've done. Can you name one feat of God's in the last thousand years that rivals the telephone? the electrical outlet? the pain killer?"

"But all the telephones and electrical outlets in the world won't save us."

"And God will? I'll put my money on my reason any time. Maybe not electrical outlets. Maybe a method of re-oxygenating the oceans, maybe a worldwide ban on all

nuclear weapons, maybe--" she broke off suddenly.

When she resumed, her tone had changed, ever so slightly. "It's your faith versus my reason. My reason tells me that if I jump off a cliff attached to a hang-glider that is built to a specific design, determined by rational thought, I'll land safely at the bottom. Your faith tells you to trust in God: jump off the same cliff without the glider--*He'll* save you, right? Because He transcends the knowledge of science, the reason of logic. Am I correct?"

"Yes."

"Then let's do it." She meant it.

Ayn was shocked and she moved to intervene.

"Okay", Marion had answered.

Time was up. The program was over. Ayn recovered, thanked her guests, and delivered the sign-off. Then as soon as the camera was off, and Marion had left the set, wordlessly, Ayn turned to her friend.

"Are you crazy? She'll kill herself!"

"Yes. I know that. And you know that. She believes differently."

"Or knows it too and accepts it--you made it hard to refuse."

"I am not responsible for her decision."

"But your very participation in a stunt like this will be as good as approving it!"

"But I do!" Carol assured her. "Or I never would have suggested it. Frankly, I admire anyone who acts in accordance with their opinions."

They were ushered off the set; Ayn directed Carol to a quiet corner where they could continue their conversation.

"Look Ayn, it's time to stop being polite to theists. It's time to stop smiling amused, as if they're children with harmless lollipops. They're *not*! There are large numbers of people who believe that any interference in the course of events is to mess with 'The Divine Plan'."

"But--"

"They think anti-nuclear activists and environmentalists are doing the devil's work, for God's sake! They're *for* nuclear war because such global devastation fits the Biblical description of the end of the world!"

Ayn was surprised, and shocked, and not completely convinced. Carol pressed on.

"Some of these people hold positions of political and economic power. They're dangerous, Ayn. And our silence only condones their doctrine of inferiority and impotence. Look," she pleaded, which was unusual for her, "we can't afford to have half the human race padding around muttering how unworthy they are, 'waiting for Godot' to save them, living in the meantime in a state of fearful dependence." She paused, then finished grimly. "Quite the contrary, Ayn--we need all the competence our species can muster to get us out of this one."

"So did it happen? Did they have 'The Great Jump-Off?'" Jeth was fascinated and horrified at the same time by his grand-za's story.

"Well, a lot of people were against it. Theists and atheists alike. Many, like Ayn, thought it was a bit drastic. And some said it was just plain silly. The theists cried out 'Who are we to presume, to demand that God prove himself how and when and where we

want--God doesn't need proof!' But then Carol cried back, 'Then neither does The Purple Platypus, and it's His will that all theists die!' That really threw them for a loop", he chuckled. "And some tried to accuse her--'those who need proof are weak in spirit'; 'but strong in mind' she answered." Jeth waited, the question still in his eyes.

"Yes", he finally said, "they had 'The Great Jump-Off. Carol and Marion. Then Carol and Bob. Then Carol and--well, you get the picture."

The media had provided ample notice of the event. So when September 14 arrived, a bright, sunny day, crowds began to gather at 'the precipice' as early as eight a.m. The jump-off was to take place at one-thirty. The chosen spot was one of the more accessible cliffs in the Tremblant ski range. It had lots of flat space on top, lots of flat space at the bottom--and nothing in between.

Ayn's network had pressured Carol to retract her challenge, to pull out of the event. Their ratings had risen since that particular episode of 'Face-Off', but they were worried about legal proceedings after the event--a worry presuming a death. And though initially in agreement with her network, after reading a fair amount of literature on the activities of numerous religious groups--rituals, education, investments, etc., Ayn reached full support of Carol's action. When she made her support vocal, the network fired her--with profuse apologies.

The two of them were at the top now, Carol making a thorough check of her hang-glider and harness, Ayn fending off the media to allow her to do so.

"No, we're not part of any group per se, we're here as individuals."

"Because we know that it's better to act according to reason than according to

faith. Knowledge, not belief, is the way out of our tailspin." Carol smiled drily at her choice of word.

"Yes, that's true. And we agree with you. But we're past the naiveté of the independent: what people do or do not do on their own *does* affect the people next door--even if they're not in positions of political or economic power. 'It's none of your business' is almost always a lie, now."

About thirty feet away, Marion was surrounded by a group of people on their knees praying.

"Dear God, help me in this, my hour of need. As you have before," Marion remembered the first time she went rock-climbing, a frayed rope nearly cost her her life but God had been with her, "so I believe You shall do again. I place my fear in Your hands, Almighty God. I come to you, Our Father, as Your loving and dutiful child. I trust Your guidance, Your will shall be done.

"Hail Mary, Mother of God, pray for me, a sinner. By the powers of your intercession, grant me..."

A man near the edge of the circle, next to someone wearing a yarmulke, suddenly stopped murmuring his rosary. He lifted his bowed head. An image had suddenly come to mind. Peter Pan? 'If you close your eyes and wish hard enough--and clap your hands three times'? He was *not* a child. He stood up slowly and turned to Carol and her hang-glider, and in a moment he saw that she was right. He might've called it a revelation. He didn't. He knew it was simply understanding. He left the prayer circle.

A megaphoned voice announced then that it was time for 'The Great Jump-Off'. Carol walked over to Marion--they hugged each other. Then they stood at a spot some

distance from the edge. Carol fastened herself onto the hang-glider. Marion whispered one last prayer. They took a few running steps and jumped off the cliff.

No one spoke. No one moved. No one went to the edge to see what had happened. Everyone knew.

When Ayn arrived at the bottom, Carol was slowly packing the hang-glider harness into its travelling case. The waiting ambulance had already taken Marion's body away. There was nothing to say. Carol's face said it all--not quite triumph, not quite horror.

"Teach me how to hang glide and I'll do the next one", Ayn said. Carol looked at her, held her gaze for a moment, then nodded.

"So there was--a next one?" Jeth asked.

"Oh yes," the old man remembered, "and a next one, and a next one. For some, Marion's death didn't change a thing. She became a martyr: 'The Lord works in wondrous ways', 'We don't always understand why He does what He does', 'We must just accept it', 'He knows best'. Or she became an unfortunate: 'Her faith wasn't strong enough', 'God punished for the sin of pride'. And so another would try. and another. Trying hard to ignore the thought that if he believed *his* faith was strong enough, he was guilty of the same sin. It was a catch 22: How can you think you've been 'chosen' while maintaining humility?" He paused to be sure Jeth appreciated the dilemma, then continued.

"But for others, Marion's death did make a difference. It became painfully clear to them what a scurry of ass-covering they had done. They became angry at the spot they

were put in--by Carol, by God--by reason, by belief."

"And *did* it make a difference--overall, I mean?" Jeth wanted to know.

"Who really knows?" he looked not at his grandson but at a spot in the air between them. "People changed--but it could've been for a number of reasons. Things got worse--much worse--you've probably studied the food, water, and oxygen rationing in history class."

"Yeah--it's incredible--that people let it go so far."

The old man looked at his grandson--he had far too much to say to that one, and not anything at all.

"People became less accepting, less passive," he tried to describe the change. "I don't know, it seems there was less apathy, less lethargy. They stopped waiting for something to happen, they stopped thinking that they'd wake up one day and everything would be better, I guess. They stopped trusting in whatever it was they had trusted in to make it better.

"I suppose that could be the result of 'a loss of faith': when there is no Divine Plan, when there is no *God* whose will will be done, then I guess people figure out pretty quick you have to make your *own* plan, carry out your own will. If you ask me, I always thought 'God's will be done' was just a high and mighty *que sera sera*, a religious *laissez-faire*, an excuse for laziness. It was plain and simple passing the buck.

"Along with that," he resumed, "came a crushing sense of responsibility. For the past, the present, and the future. Everyone knew *it was our fault*; we were to blame--not a god, not a devil. And since there wasn't going to be any knight in shining armour to come rescue us, well--"

He tried to summarize then, "There was a lot more co-operation, it seems to me, after 'The Great Jump-Off';co-operation with each other to find a way out--"

"I wonder if the concept of afterlife had anything to do with it. I mean, theists believe there's something better after this life, no? Or at least a second chance?"

"Yes--you may have a point. As soon as you know that this is all you've got, all you'll ever get, you might be more apt to try and make a better go of it."

"Did anyone still believe in their Santa Claus after that?" Larah spoke up. She had followed most of the story.

"Yes, a few. But it's funny. Suddenly one of the 'Golden Rules' was 'God helps those who help themselves'", he chuckled.

They sat for a moment enjoying the warmth of the sunlight pouring into the room. Jeth noticed then that his grand-za's friend had fallen asleep. He realized his grand-za probably wanted to do the same, it had been a long afternoon.

"Well," he stood up, "perhaps it's time for us to go." Larah agreed and gave her great-grand-za a kiss good-bye. She climbed off the rocking chair and took Jeth's hand.

"We'll see you Thursday then," he said as he and Larah went to the door. The old man nodded, then got up to wave out the window.

Fifteen minutes later they were on the highway, Larah drifting off and Jeth thinking about his grand-za's story. Usually he ignored the billboards with their inane messages stating in bold colours either the obvious or the useless. But now one of them caught his eye--'If ye save yeself, ye shall be saved': it seemed more than ever to be moronically blatant, a simple tautology.

