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## Jesus Christ Took My Baby Away

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## Jesus Christ Took My Baby Away

"The fuck is with all the flip-flops back there?"

"What?"

"Flip-flops. They were all over the place."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know, flip flops, the kind of sandals. Thongs, whatever you want to call them. The kind that go between your toes and flip and flop and shit. You know what I mean now? Flips flops."

"I know what flip-flops are."

"So what's with them? They're all over the place."

"You mean in the stores or something?"

"No. At that school. Your friend's school we stayed at last night. Everyone at that stupid preppy East Coast school was wearing them. It's like they don't own any fuckin' shoes or something. It's not even just those douches with their collars up, it's everyone. Every student on that campus had a pair."

"Jerry. We were in Pennsylvania. That's not the East Coast."

"Isn't it?"

"No. In order to be on the East Coast I think you have to touch the coast."

"Screw that."

And our conversation ends there. I know if I argue with my brother anymore I'll only encourage him, but there isn't even anything to argue about. It's not like he even has a good point. He does this all the time, finds any way to offend people and first offends them and then gets them to defend themselves, laughing the whole time because it's not like he really can be offended by anything because he really has no real opinions. My brother is one of those people who you could say doesn't care about anything. But then, when I think about it, I'm one of those people to.

Sometimes it's fun, like when we tell liberals that the Patriot Act isn't violating enough of our rights until everyone is yelling, or explaining to our conservatives that Saddam Hussein is our generation's Che Guevera, a brave revolutionary who is unjustly imprisoned and needs to be freed and immortalized. However, when it's just me and my brother he takes anything he can and twists it around and turns it into an argument that eventually ends in one of us yelling or laughing. I'm not in the mood for an argument now, so I just look out the window.

"Let's put in a CD," I say, looking over at him.

"What are you in the mood for?"

"I don't know." I know whatever I suggest will erupt into one of two things, either an argument or background information on whatever I choose. My brother has vast stores of knowledge and wisdom surrounding virtually every CD in his collection. Actually, what he considers to be knowledge and wisdom is really conspiracies he's read on the internet or heard from friends or made up himself.

"Ok. Shit. Let's listen to... fuck...Tupac sound good?"

"No, not now. I'm not in a rap mood."

"I am, and I'm driving."

What do I say to that? He is driving. I realize I've failed, because I wanted music I could relax to and ignore, and music that would prevent conversation. Instead I'm trying to ignore and relax gangsta rap, which will naturally be accompanied by a lecture from my brother on the life and times of Tupac Shakur, specifically detailing the conspiracies surrounding his death.

I'm looking out the window at nothing. Nothing but night and darkness and occasional lights scattered around but not the pretty kind of lights or anything, just dim yellow ones scattered around in fields off in the distance and hiding behind hills or maybe in farmhouses on the side of the road. I think we might be

in Maryland now. We're going to one of the Carolinas, I think the Southern one, the one with all the hicks who fly their Confederate flags and hate black people and were the first to secede from the Union. That's all I know about South Carolina, and all I know about North Carolina is that it's the Carolina that's North of South Carolina.

"So do you think he's alive or not?"

"Who?"

"Tupac. Did he fake his death?"

"No. I don't want to talk about it either."

"Yeah you do."

"No I don't."

"You have to accept the fact that Tupac is alive."

"Ok. You're right. Tupac is alive. He faked his own death so that he could sell more records. Now can we not talk about it?"

"No, because you don't understand why he did it. Tupac wanted to escape from the limelight. It wasn't about becoming popular. He didn't want or need the money. He was inspired by Machiavelli when he was in prison..."

I don't need to listen. I've heard most of it before. I look out the window again. I don't think I've ever been in Maryland before, but then I'm not sure if I'm even in it now. I don't know if the darkness with its scattered lights is what I would be seeing if I was in Maryland. I know I haven't been to either of the Carolinas.

"...always wore a bulletproof vest, every single night of his life. So where was the vest the night he got murdered? He was wearing it because he had planned the shooting. Suge Knight was driving the car and was the only witness to his supposed death but was never even questioned by the police because they were involved, they had been paid off and..."

No matter what we're listening to, my brother will do this. Every time we listen to Bob Dylan he talks about Hibbing, the town in Minnesota where Bob Dylan was from. And how he was born as Bob Zimmerman. And that "Positively Fourth Street" is about Fourth Street in Minneapolis. The only reason we care about this is because we're from Minnesota. Everybody in Minnesota is obsessed with any "culture" that comes out of it. F. Scott Fitzgerald, Garrison Keillor, Prince, Kirby Puckett, Josh Hartnett...

"...no autopsy and he was cremated the next day. The law requires an autopsy on all murder victims. Then you can't ignore how often the number seven comes up in his death. And seven is the number of heaven..."

We're from a town called Stillwater. It's a pseudo-small town outside the Twin Cities, the only real cities in Minnesota. Stillwater is very confused over its image, which is why I call it a pseudo-small town. It used to be a rustic little town, the first one in Minnesota, but now is torn between staying small and cute or becoming commercial and all about fast food and corporations or becoming a suburb of the cities. It's like a seventh grader deciding whether to be a goth or a prep or a nerd or a skater, et cetera.

"...so think about that. Who is the other celebrity to fake his death and then come back, bigger than ever and with the greatest following in history?"

I really wish it wasn't night, so I could actually see out the goddamn window.

"Francis?"

Shit, apparently he actually wants a response out of me.

"What?"

"Did you hear my question?"

"No."

"I was asking if you realize the connection between Tupac and the other historical figure who faked his death?"

"You mean Machiavelli again?"

"No. Jesus, man. Tupac is the Jesus of our generation. Look at it, a hero who inspires the poor and oppressed and changes the world through his words. And then things get rough, he gets executed but he's not really gone. It explains the significance of seven in his music, it explains why he refers to Suge as Simon, it makes sense. Totally makes sense. I mean, he had an album called *Resurrection*."



"You know, I don't think Jesus really faked his death. The story goes more like that he was executed and then he rose again on the third day."

"Yeah, he tricked everyone into thinking he was dead."

"Goddamn't, Jesus wasn't tricking people. He was actually murdered by the Romans."

"What the fuck? Aren't you an atheist anymore?"

"Yeah, but what's that got to do with it? The Bible doesn't say that Jesus faked his death. It's totally different."

"No, it's exactly the same. The hero. The villains. The oppressed. All the same characters. And after he dies his voice lives on, while he is also secretly alive and in hiding."

"Jesus didn't rise from the grave and just hide for a while. He walked around performing goddamn miracles!"

"Dude, Francis, do you believe in him or not? Make up your mind."

For the record, both my brother and I are Lutheran-raised atheists. Our town is pretty much all Lutheran, but with a good smattering of kids like us, coping with our disillusionment and searching for a more satisfying religion. The only other options in the town are Catholicism and that New Wave Non-Denominational Born-Again Jesus-Loves-You-Accept-Him-Into-Your-Heart-And-Give-Us-Money Christianity that does well with people who want some sort of insurance for the afterlife but aren't satisfied with what they've got so far. Jerry and I are both sick of what we've been raised with, but he tries to find new forms of "spirituality" while I don't really care as much. My brother has experimented with Buddhism, Taoism, Shintoism, Transcendentalism, The Church of Scientology, and so on. He tries new religions the way the other kids in our town go through drugs. On the other hand, I'm satisfied with disillusionment.

"It doesn't matter whether or not I believe in him. You're changing the entire story of the New Testament just prove whatever your point is. What the hell if your point? That Tupac is God?"

"No. I never said Tupac is God. I'm saying he just as important as Jesus for our modern society. And he did the same thing as Jesus, he needed an elaborate staged death so that his life would become more mysterious and his message more significant."

"I don't even know how to respond to that."

"You can just tell me I'm right if you want."

"Jesus..."

"Tupac."

"Shut the fuck up."

He just smiles and keeps driving. I wonder if he does have a point. I wonder if anything he said even makes sense. I wonder what South Carolina is going to be like. Or maybe North Carolina. I wonder if my relatives will recognize me. I haven't seen some of them in years. Or maybe I have and I forgot.

"Have you met her yet?" I ask him.

"Who?"

"The girl Merle is marrying."

"No. I wonder if she's hot."

"Grandma showed me a picture. She's not bad."

"Did I tell you about how I told my friends about it and they thought Merle was a lesbian, but then I told them that Merle is a guy's name."

"Yeah. Is Merle a guy's name?"

"I guess. I don't think Grandma would have let her grandson have a girl's name."

"Yeah, but Grandma doesn't really like Merle."

"Probably his name. Or this girl he's marrying."

I can't even remember if I like Merle. I remember that he wrote poetry. My brother would make fun of it. Merle would write it and email it out to people, and somehow I got on the list. It would always involve broken hearts or shattered dreams or torn ideas or fallen aspirations. Either that or oxymorons like "abstract concrete" or "organized chaos" or "a broken perfection." He also didn't use capitalization and avoided punctuation.

When I think about his poetry, I doubt that I could have ever liked Merle. This wedding is going to suck.

We're in a diner now, somewhere in Delaware. Apparently we haven't gone through Maryland yet, because my brother got lost in Delaware during the night but didn't want to tell me. He got distracted during the Tupac conversation and missed a turn and we ended up lost for eight hours in the second smallest state in the union.

When I check a map in the diner, I realize there was no reason for us to ever be in Delaware. He says he wanted to see the ocean, but then realized it was too dark, and when he tried to turn around it just got confusing. Apparently Delaware is a peninsula.

"Did you know Delaware is a peninsula?" He's eating some kind of eggs that he only ordered because he hadn't heard of them before. Every time we eat at a restaurant he insists on getting something we don't have in Minnesota, although it ends up being something we do have under a different name. The strangest thing we've seen on a menu so far is "mush," when we were in Ohio. It's apparently something like oatmeal. The waitress compared it to grits. Our only experience with grits is the movie *My Cousin Vinny*, and neither of us could remember what they were in that.

"No. Maybe. I just remember that it's really small on maps. Why didn't we fly to South Carolina? How did you convince me to do this drive with you?"

"Because this is fun. And cheaper."

"Whatever." I don't even know if it is cheaper. I looked at the cost of flights and we could have gotten round-way tickets for under a hundred. But neither of us knew how to figure out if that was cheaper than driving, so we assumed driving was the cheap option. I'm not sure if I even want to go to this wedding. At least I'm missing three days of school for it. I told my teachers I was visiting college out East.

"Did I tell you the song I just wrote?"

"You wrote a song?"

"I write lots of songs."

"Ok. Which one are you talking about?"

"The one I just wrote."

"Yes, you told me about it."

"No, I didn't. But I'm going to."

"Yes, you did. It was about... your childhood? Love? Heartbreak? It was one of those, I can't remember which."

"Wrong. I didn't tell you. But the name of it is awesome."

"What's the name?"

"I can't tell you."

"'I Can't Tell You' is the name?"

"No. I want you to guess the name."

"How the fuck am I going to guess the name?"

"Just guess. I want to see if you can get it."

"You want me to just blindly guess words and see if they are the name of a song you just wrote? Jerry, there are millions of words in the English language. How the hell am I going to guess the exact combination of words you chose for your latest song?"

"Because, it's stuff we were talking about earlier."

"Is this about Tupac?"

"No. Close."

"Jesus?" "Naturally. It's about Jesus."

"Jesus... it is religious? What's it called?"

"Jesus Christ Took My Baby Away."

"..."

"Isn't that brilliant?"

"..."

"Jesus Christ Took My Baby Away."



"You wrote a song called 'Jesus Christ Took My Baby Away'? I thought you weren't religious? Aren't you a Taoist right now?"

"No. I'm looking into Jainism. But that doesn't matter. It's not a Christian song. But it could be. That's the point. Just think about the name. What's the first thing you think it's about?"

"Um... The Ramones. Because you clearly stole the name from the song 'The KKK Took My Baby Away.'"

"Exactly. So what's it about then?"

"Lack of originality?"

"Don't piss me off here," he says with a joking tone and a very passive-aggressive gleam in his eyes. I figure I should humor him, I don't think we need this argument to escalate into yelling. Not in a diner somewhere in Delaware.

"Ok. You want me to guess what your song is about. Is it about Jesus? Taking your baby away? As in, your baby died and went to heaven and it was Jesus' doing?"

"Perfect. But that doesn't have to be what it's about. It could be about anything.

"Like Tupac, or what?"

"No. Well, maybe. Just think about it. What else could those six words mean?"

"I don't know."

"Ok. I'll give you one. What if it's from the perspective of an old Jewish woman whose child just converted to Christianity. Or a Muslim whose child was just murdered by crusaders in the Middle Ages. How awesome is that?"

"Beyond words."

"Or maybe baby doesn't mean child, it means girlfriend, or lover, or whatever."

"I'm not sure if this is an genius as you seem to think."

"You have to open your mind, Francis. You aren't evaluating it correctly. This song will be a hit. It will blow people's minds. Because it works on so many levels. Every word in the song could have multiple meanings. There are so many stories this song tells. Every one hears a different one. You heard one about a baby dying. Someone else hears one about The Crusades, someone else hears about Jesus dying for our sins, someone else hears one about Tupac. Maybe it's about a guy who's girlfriend left him because she became a born-again Christian or about a girl who chose a Jesus-guy over him or maybe his friend became a Christian and it changed her personality and she was never the same, like that Ben Folds song about acid, or it's about what you said, Jesus taking someone through death. Or it's about someone who's baby was killed in a gang fight with Tupac fans. Mystery. Various interpretations. It's what makes music. It's what makes art."

I am a little upset to realize that I like his point. I hate it when he has an idea that I like. Although I don't know that this song really sounds too good, he has a good point about mystery being the key to music, to art. But he's forgetting a huge element of it.

"Aren't you forgetting something? Something Tupac had and Jesus had and everyone who hits it big has to have?"

"What?"

"Mystery isn't enough, Jerry. You need tragedy. You need an early death, shrouded in confusion and... you know, all that. Ambiguosness, or whatever."

"My song's got tragedy. It's about someone's baby being taken away."

"No, I mean you personally need tragedy. That's why Tupac is huge. He's got the good music and the mystery, but there's the tragic aspect to it. He never knew his father and he went to prison and he got in gang fights. It's why Jesus hit is so big, because he got nailed to a cross. Tragedy is the reason anyone cares about Jeff Buckley and Kurt Cobain and Buddy Holly and Jimi Hendrix and Biggy Smalls and Elliott Smith...and...and...and fucking Mozart! And Abraham Lincoln. And Ghandi, and JFK! If you want to be a hit you have to die young and suddenly and mysteriously."

"That's not true. Look at all the musicians who never died. Or the ones who did die and it killed their careers. Like John Denver, he hasn't become more successful since he died! And the Beatles, John Lennon died years after they broke up and they're still considered one of the greatest bands ever!"

His voice is rising and a couple people look over. I smile, because he knows I have a point and even though neither of us totally knows what it is, we won't back down.

"Unless you die, or at least pretend to, in a mysterious manner, you'll never make it big."

"Not all those people you named are really that big. And not all of them died in mysterious ways. And Abraham Lincoln wasn't even a musician."

"Yeah, but he's on the five. I was proving the point that no matter what your field is, you will be better remembered if you die tragically and before your time."

He sips his coffee. I don't think he even likes coffee, he just drinks it because it fits his image.

"So what is your song about?" I ask him. "You have to have written it about something before you came up with all these theories on what else it could mean. And you have to secretly have an answer to it. What else are you going to say in interviews when you're a big star and your fans want to know the secret?"

"I'm gonna say fuck you and ask you if you're going to finish your hash browns."

I hand him the hash browns and lean back in my chair, full from my omelet.

Neither of us says anything more. He's got me thinking about art and inspiration and fame. But then he looks up from his food, and the look in his eyes isn't joking at all. I can tell I'm about to get the real Jerry, this is going to be what he really thinks about music and art and inspiration and what his stupid song is about.

"When I was younger..." he says, talking slowly. I can tell he's talking slow so he can decide on his words and sound profound and make me really think.

"When I was younger, and disillusioned with being a Lutheran and a Minnesotan and all that, and having nothing more to our state than Bob Dylan and Jesse Ventura... well, that has nothing to do with it, not the Minnesota part. Well, I would think about religion and I thought that I didn't believe Jesus was God, but he was still, you know, a smart guy and wise and a good philosopher. But then I thought about it more. And I realized that yeah, it's a nice idea that the meek will inherit the Earth, but... Jesus is an asshole. He's egotistical, he's self-centered... he said he's the Son of fucking God. So you know what? I take Tupac over Jesus. Because I am the baby, that song is about my innocence. It's... okay maybe it isn't about that. Maybe it's about... I don't know where I'm going with this."

And then he laughs and takes another bite of my hash browns and I look out the window of the diner, at another boring state and decide it doesn't matter. None of it matters. Neither of us cares who is right and who is wrong and what makes good music.

I think about what it all means and what the this trip means and why we're in this diner and why this was created and for what purpose and who did what and how we don't even understand our own symbolism and metaphors because no one understands symbolism and nothing matters.

Fuck that. Fuck all of that. Metaphors are bullshit.

*David Lovett, '08*