

STORIES FROM CHURCH
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INTRODUCTION

I am a child of church. I've been nurtured by its stories, comforted by its music and grounded in its traditions. Church has also been my tormentor, sparring partner and, at times, a source of massive disappointment.

Church is the isolated community of black Baptists on the ridge near my birthplace in far Southern Ohio, where Sunday after Sunday, razor sharp harmony is lifted in praise. Church is the TV evangelist, the cloistered sisters and the former president. Church is children, our children, the ones who look to us for the tools with which to repair the various messes we'll soon pass on to them.

These stories of church are offered not in despair, for I've far too much invested in church for that. Besides, there's no time for despair; there's too much to be done. No, for better or worse, in good times and bad, church is in my blood, my mind, my heart, thus I want to make clear my continuing faith in church.

I've changed most of the names that appear in these stories, even though, sadly, many of the people I describe are long dead. But church is one of the few places where the line between the living and the dead can be blurred now and then. And so the characters in these stories will live so long as I live, nurturing me, comforting me, grounding me and tormenting me all along my journey. Just like church itself.

ORIENTATION

Sister Hughes ruled the church nursery with an iron fist. Try to weasel your way in to sneak a peak at the babies without her okay and a kid might lose an arm or a leg.

Sister Hughes loved the babies at Trinity Church. Ugly babies, bald babies, cranky babies – it mattered not a whit to Sister Hughes; they belonged to their mommas and Jesus Monday through Saturday, but come Sunday morning they were hers.

Sister Hughes knew babies. One cold Wednesday prayer meeting, she let out that her dad left her mom and her when she was little. Sister Hughes said she grew up wild because her mom had to work so much just to keep body and soul together.

Sister Hughes said she met a boy from Jackson that made her feel so good that she would've married him if only he'd stuck around after she got pregnant. But he didn't.

Sister Hughes' mom kept her out of school once she started showing, then took her to stay with relatives over in Huntington the week before she had her baby. All she remembered was the pain; it hurt to birth her boy and it hurt worse when her aunt took the baby to be adopted by a nice couple over near Charleston.

So Sister Hughes guarded her babies like one of those gargoyles you see in picture books. And a kid could get hurt trying to get in the nursery without her okay.

Church is full of folk like Sister Hughes – people working out some old hurt. Maybe that's what church was for her, a place to work out her hurt so nobody else had to hurt the way she did. Maybe that's what church was meant to be.

3.

SERIOUS

Johnny Lewis was a good first-grade buddy, save for church. We'd shoot more German soldiers than Carter had liver pills when we played soldiers at his house in town. And we'd chase them through the woods and across the strip mine behind our house out in the country. If we got bored or it was raining or we just felt like starting trouble, we'd shoot Johnny's sister, too, just to wind her up and see if she'd cuss us and get in trouble with Johnny's mom.

Yep, when we were chasing German soldiers Johnny could laugh and jump and shoot the eyelash off a gnat at fifty paces. But he got real serious when it came to church. He dressed up and didn't laugh at all.

I thought maybe Johnny was real religious at church so he could make up for all the ornery things he did the rest of the week, but when I asked him about it he told me that his dad whipped him when he got home if he didn't behave at church. Johnny said his dad hit him real hard one time – the time he whispered a funny joke during communion. Johnny said he'd take a regular beating from his dad anytime compared to the one he got for acting up in church that time. So Johnny Lewis was never much fun at church, even when we got to be teenagers.

Sometimes I wonder if Johnny has much use for church now that we're all grown up. And I wonder if maybe a lot of perfectly good people run from church just because somebody took the fun out of church for them. That would explain why so much of church is run by folk like Johnny's dad, prune-faced grownups with their scared kids.

4.

Church can be fun. Church can even help heal the wounds inflicted upon us by those who say they love us. I hope Johnny knows that.

VERBOSE

A Republican. Joey Evans' dad was a Republican. Joey's dad told me so himself, thinking I was old enough to figure out what he was talking about. My old man didn't know Joey Evans' dad very well, but he told me that we were Democrats, thinking I was old enough to figure out what he was talking about. (Maybe I just looked old for my age or something, because grownups were *a/ways* telling me something that they figured I was I was old enough to figure out.)

One hot summer night Joey and I were camped out in a tent in Joey's back yard. Between skeeters the size of B-17s and Joey's goofy sister SNEAKING OUT TO spook us when we'd start to fall asleep, we finally surrendered and came inside. Joey found some cookies and we fired up the family Zenith. And there they were, real live Democrats. Best I could tell, they must have been having some kind of talking contest. I was curious about the whole thing, but Joey said he shouldn't be watching any Democrat contest now that he knew that he was a Republican, so Joey turned over and set to snoring like a rusty buzz saw.

Me, I was resolved to get to the bottom of this Democrat and Republican business, so I tried to figure out what this talking contest was all about. Now, some folks just have a gift for talking but never saying much. That must have been the kind of

5.

contest the Democrats were having - a contest to see who could talk the most and say the least. And the competition was fierce, so I stayed up well into the night, watching grownups just talk and talk.

Per her usual Joey's mom dragged us out for church the next morning. It came to me to ask the preacher if *he'd* ever thought about entering either the Democrat or Republican talking contest, for given his gift for talking a lot without saying much, shoot, I figured he'd have a fair shot at first place! But I couldn't bring myself to ask him, even when he shook my hand after church. I'd never heard the preacher say much good about the world outside church, save to tell us not to be like it. So I figured he might not take kindly to my suggestion.

Now that I'm older, I know that the world is not nearly as bad as that preacher said. I've met lots of good people, seen sunsets on the water and slept on mountain tops. Sure there's a good deal that needs fixing, but it won't get fixed by dressing up and sitting in an oak pew for an hour a week.

So maybe church is just suppose to be a place to get your batteries charged up and sent back out to do something good in the world. Either way, it sure beats a talking contest, be it Democrat or Republican or just church.

POSSESSION

People would come from all over Jackson County just to watch Sister Jones get blessed on a Sunday evening. Sister Jones would get blessed by the Holy Ghost, just thinking about her home in the sky, then start talking to Jesus and anybody else within earshot. You'd be sitting there in church, when somebody'd say, "How 'bout we sing Old Number One Hundred and Sixty-Five." (Sister Jones loved Old Number One Hundred and Sixty-Five; it was "I'll Fly Away.") Without fail, Sister Jones would hit the isle running and start praising Jesus and hugging people.

Now, me and Charlie figured she must have had a direct line to God. She pretty much had to have some sort of divine hand holding her in place when she'd mount a pew like a lumberjack and start running the back of every pew in the house, front to back. You'd have to see it for yourself, so Charlie and me would slip over to the ball diamond before church on a Sunday evening, just to round up the kids to watch her go.

Well, one summer evening in 1965, the preacher had just finished up an extra nice prayer when somebody called for Number One Hundred and Sixty-Five. Charlie looked at me and grinned. Big. And sure enough, toward the end of the second chorus, Sister Jones hit the front pew and let out a yell that would have scared John Wayne on his best day.

Pretty soon a few other grownups got blessed and started running the isles, too, causing Charlie and me to start our Sunday night prayer – the one where we asked

7.

God to *please* not let Sister Jones hug on us. Good God in heaven, how Sister Jones loved hugging kids!

I was still deep in prayer when Brother Tom Brown tapped me on the shoulder and told me I'd better duck. And duck, I did, for it seemed that a bat got loose in church just about the time that Sister Jones was finishing her second lap around the pews. And now most everybody was taking turns trying to hit the bat and miss Sister Jones! Me and Charlie could scarcely believe our eyes, but Old Irene, the church pianist, just kept on banging out Old Number One Hundred and Sixty-Five. Heck, she even raised the key from G to A at one point, never missing a beat. With Sister Jones, the bat and a goodly number of copies of *The All American Hymnal* all up in the air, the preacher was going to have to go some to manage a serious sermon that night.

It was Brother Ed Lewis' hymnal that downed the bat. I heard somebody thank Jesus when it hit the floor. Old Wanda finally gave up on the hymn. Sister Jones finally landed back in her pew. Brother Lewis took the bat to its final rest and we rounded up most of the stray hymnbooks...and the preacher preached anyway.

After all these years, I don't hold it against the preacher for trying to act like nothing out of the ordinary happened. He probably liked control, just like the rest of us. Maybe he was afraid of what might happen if church took off without him; after all, he was the preacher. But he – and everybody else there that night – we might have missed something. We might have missed a chance to see what happens when the Spirit just ups and does something different, something unexpected, something joyous. Something sacred and special.

8.

Maybe church ought to be a place where the unexpected happens. A place where creativity can make an appearance and get a standing ovation from souls who are flat-out hungry for something sacred and special.

IMPEDIMENT

South Street Schoolhouse. When kids never missed a single day of school at South Street Schoolhouse, they'd get a ribbon. I got one of those ribbons, and I got the hard way; I sat in front of Robert Crabtree every day, Monday through Friday, from the fall on 1962 until the summer of 1963.

Robert brought his lunch every day, and Robert ate the same thing for lunch every day: a sardine sandwich. And I sat smack in front of him.

Now, Robert's folks were poor. And they were poor in a town full of poor folks, so you know they were *real* poor. And it came to us that Robert Crabtree's mom had died. She died just after the first good snow, and after that, Robert got real quiet. Once he got quiet, our teacher, Miss Brisker, would give him extra attention. She knew that Robert Crabtree's dad never had to fix a lunch for four kids before, so she'd bring Robert something extra off her tray. Every day. Miss Bates never seemed to care for sardines any more than the rest of us, but she sure did care about Robert.

What happened next came to us from Angie Miller, who went to the Methodist church, same church as Miss Brisker. It seems that Miss Brisker brought Robert and his sisters to church with her one Sunday, even though Robert's dad was dead set

against church. And Robert's dad wasn't much on church account of some of the people who went to church – the ones that liked to look down their blueblood noses and tell everybody else how to live. But Robert's dad said kids ought to make up their own minds about such things, so he went along with it when Miss Brisker offered to take the kids to church.

Well, Angie said that everything went okay in Sunday School, but when Miss Brisker went downstairs to get the Crabtree kids away from the cookie table, a few of the rich grownups took Miss Brisker to the side and asked her why she brought kids dressed like that to church. Didn't she know that God wants kids to dress up and smell clean when they go to church?

Angie said Miss Brisker turned several shades of red before she settled on what to say. Angie said Miss Brisker said she was pretty sure that God could hear prayers whether we're dressed like Jackie Kennedy or buck naked, thank you. She was even pretty sure that God likes people when they're not trying to be someone they're not, thank you. And Robert told me that on the way home, Miss Brisker said that Robert's dad was right about church and there'd be ice skating in hell before she'd ever go back to church.

Maybe church was invented to remind rich folks that if God were ever forced to take sides in that rich folks/poor folks thing, it'd most likely be a hard life for the rich folks. And maybe church ought to decide, once and forever, to take people for who and what they are. No questions asked.

ANESTHESIA

We rented a house and we were town people for a short while. That's how I met Judge Morgan and Eddie Comer, two grownups a kid could trust. Judge and Eddie were dirt poor when it came to the things of this world, but they told some of the best stories a kid could ever hear.

Judge lived just up the alley. He'd let me read old *Reader's Digests*. He'd let me sit with him and listen to the Reds, telling me things about baseball that no announcer even thought about. And he'd let me use his best glove when we'd step out in the alley to see if my curve ball was getting any better.

And Eddie lived down next to the post office, which was next to the barber shop that was across the street from the drug store where Eddie would stand and wave at school bus kids on their way across town on a clear, fall morning. And other times he would tell us a funny joke or crack his knuckles or cut off a piece of "Under the Double Eagle" on a rusty old ten-hole Marine Band harmonica – the one Eddie said saved his life when a piece of Tojo's shrapnel hit him in the chest over on Guam.

Judge and Eddie both played minor league ball, though they never played for the same club. Judge was a catcher and Eddie pitched. Judge said only fools tried to steal on him, and Eddie said he was the first minor leaguer to strike out Stan Musical swinging. Baseball was baseball back then. That's what Judge and Eddie said.

I asked Judge if Eddie ever stole second on him. Judge spit. He spit, then he told me that Eddie Comer never hit a baseball hard enough in his life to make it to first, let alone steal second! And when I asked Eddie about Judge, Eddie said he never *did* worry about his hitting on account of he wasn't paid to hit those Texas League, excuse-me-bloopers like Judge Morgan hit! No sir, Eddie told me that he *earned* his saw buck per month, plus meal money, by striking out slow slugs like Judge Morgan.

Judge said he still remembered the time he batted for Slim Edwards up in Albany. Eddie Comer was pitching that day, and Eddie had hit Slim smack in the ribs in the bottom of the fifth inning because of the long homer Slim had hit off Eddie in the bottom of the third. Judge said he faced Eddie square on, but Eddie threw the first pitch at his head and the second one at his behind and the third one took the mask right off the umpire! With a 3-0 count, Eddie finally threw a strike that Judge turned around and sent east and somewhere towards Europe. (Judge said he read in the paper the next day where Hitler cussed that fella, Judge Morgan, for hitting another ball in his bunker.) That's what Judge said.

But Eddie said Judge Morgan was a bald-faced liar. Eddie said he pitched to Judge just one time, and that was the time that he got two quick strikes on him, then threw him a yacker so sharp that when Judge missed that curveball by a good two feet, all a body could feel was a mighty wind. Yep, Eddie said he read in the paper the next day that Judge's swing knocked Roosevelt's radio plum off the Oval Office desk. That's what Eddie said.

My old man told me that Judge lost his left hand on account of Judge used to come home to work in the brick factory in the off-season. And after he got it stuck in one of the machines, he lost his job just started drinking real heavy.

And my old man told me that Eddie always *did* drink too much. He drank when he was playing ball so he could stand the pressure, then he drank when he wasn't playing ball because he couldn't stand not playing ball.

I remember that Eddie Comer died first. And they say that the day Judge Morgan marched with the American Legion Post to carry Eddie to the bone yard was the day Judge swore off the whiskey for good. Judge told Mom that he'd spent the better part of thirty-odd years numb or looking to get numb, just to forget his dreams. And he said it was time to see what life was like when a body's not numb.

Judge took a part-time job at the hardware store. He shaved real regular and even set foot in church now and then. He said he just came for the praying. He told Mom he didn't give one hoot in hell about the rest of that carrying on – said that it was worse than any bush-league USO show ever put on for the dog faces in Italy - but that praying part was special. It was kind of like getting God's ear while your friends sit next to you.

I don't remember Judge Morgan's funeral, except that it was heavy on prayer. Me, I'm not too sure that *anybody's* prayer ever gets any higher than the floor, but I'm fairly sure that church is supposed to be a quiet place for folks whose dreams just up

13.

and leave them one day. We church folk could do a lot worse than to be family to souls who have had enough of being numb or looking to get numb. A lot worse.

CONCLUSION

Church is a most imperfect institution. It's been a safe harbor for hypocrites and pedophiles and homophobes. And it's no wonder that church as we know is dying. But some of us get it; some of us know that church, when stripped of its outdated beliefs and antiquated forms, still holds promise.

Thus we end as we began, slightly critical yet eternally hopeful. And I say again, church is in my heart, my mind and my blood. How can I despair when there is so much to be done?