THE MAGICIAN'S SON AND OTHER ESSAYS

by

Benjamin G. Wilkins

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Committee:

Director

Department Chairperson

Dean, College of Humanities and Social Sciences

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

By

Benjamin G. Wilkins
Bachelor of Arts
University of Virginia, 2006

Director: Stephen Goodwin, Professor
Department of English

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THE MAGICIAN'S SON AND OTHER ESSAYS

Benjamin G. Wilkins, M.F.A.

George Mason University, 2011

Thesis Director: Stephen Goodwin

This thesis is a collection of imaginative essays that explore my relationship to faith, family, and their intersection. The essays are personal, though I would hesitate to call the work a memoir, as the personal experiences related herein are meant to be a lens through which I explore other subjects, rather than the subjects themselves. Some essays are written in a traditional essay format, some are written as graphic essays (comics), and others straddle that nebulous line between lyric essay and prose poetry. They are all true: which is to say that they are accurate speculations about complicated relationships and experiences. That being said, the essayist's relationship to Fact is always somewhat ambiguous. My duty is to the story, not to the facts, so I cannot, for example, verify that each word written as dialogue was actually spoken, though most of them were. Though they have been drafted and re-drafted, these essays are from all all three years of my program, and are meant to represent both what I have learned in pursuit of this degree and my strong belief in the diversity of the essay form.
Rev. Dr. J. Michael Wilkins ("Dad"): My father is the pastor of Manly Memorial Baptist Church in Lexington, Virginia. He proudly bought me my first comic book, and I cannot remember ever seeing him without his mustache.

Lucy Rex Wilkins ("Mom"): Trained as a choral director and singer, my mother has spent most of my life working as an historical tour guide, including several years dressed as a woman from the 18th Century in Williamsburg. If I have an inordinate love of Julie Andrews musicals, it is all her fault.

Brian J. Wilkins ("Brough"): My brother is two years older and two inches shorter than myself. Also, I grew my beard way before he did and he can’t even grow a decent mustache. For all that, he is also a fantastic poet and much smarter than I am.

Elizabeth C. Bowman ("Mighty Mousie"): My sister Beth is two (sometimes three!) years my junior but faster and probably stronger. However, she was raised by wolves from ages 3-7 which, I feel, gives her an unfair advantage in a footrace. She is a photographer and a sculptor and is fearless.

Julie R. Wilkins ("née Loomis"): Not long after her appearance in "La Paz de Dios" Julie and I were married. She is exceedingly tolerant of my eccentricities and has very pretty brown eyes.
PENNIES FOR TRAVELER’S GRAVE

1.

In Lexington, VA, the year is as much 1870 as it is 2011. Time has touched the town, filling it with cars and concrete, Wal-Mart and the Chinese Buffet, but it has touched it lightly. Here, as in 1870, The American Civil War (The War Between the States, The War of Northern Aggression) has ended, but it hasn’t yet been forgotten. Its memory has been scored with artillery shells into the surrounding hills of the Shenandoah Valley.

To see its touch you only have to stand on Main Street, facing the campus of the Virginia Military Institute and close your eyes. Erase cars and listen as the horse-drawn carriage clops and creaks its way along the road. Feel the concrete and asphalt into dirt and cobblestone beneath your feet. Listen to the drifting of hymns sung (it is a Sunday), hanging heavy, like smoke caught in the wind, unsure which way to blow. Point your ears west where fires roar and hammers strike dissonant chords on anvils: ex-slaves are beating bullets into nails at Buffalo Forge.

Lexington is a place not frozen so much as melted in time. It does exist in the present, but its past is almost as strong. It peaks from around corners; it pools in shadows like memory. Lexington is thick with 1870 - sticky with it. It gets in your eyes and clings to your clothes. It lingers, like tobacco smoke, in the Confederate gray uniforms of the VMI Keydets.

1870 doesn’t haunt Lexington as much as stubbornly refuse to go away. It is the year that Virginia became the first ex-Confederate State to rejoin the Union, the year the Brooklyn Bridge was built, the year that the 15th Amendment gave African-American men the right to vote, and
the year that Robert E. Lee, Rebel General and symbol of the Lost Cause, died and was laid to rest beneath the Chapel that already bore his name, on the campus of Washington College. His horse, Traveler, is buried outside.

2.

A few years ago, my mother led me on a tour of the Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson House, on Washington, Street. Jackson was a major figure in the war - seen as Lee’s right hand until his death in 1863. He was shot accidentally by one of his own soldiers when returning from The Battle of Chancelorsville, mistaken for Union Cavalry. In Lexington he is a saint, still alive in a triumphant, aural half-life: one is always hearing his name. “If only Jackson had survived...”

If only Jackson had survived the South may very well have won the war – Lee was more cautious after he died - and so his accidental death seems more like Providence now. According to my mother, that’s probably the interpretation he would have taken too. He died on a Sunday.

His house, where he lived while a Professor at the Virginia Military Institute, has been preserved as a museum to his life, especially his life before the war. It is, oddly for a military figure, a shrine to his domesticity rather than to his glory.

My mother does not technically work as a tour guide here. She serves as the volunteer coordinator, though she often gives the tours when there aren’t enough volunteers to wrangle. I think she wishes she were the tour guide rather than an administrator - the endless paperwork does not suit her. Whatever organizational skills she possesses have been earned, learned by force of will rather than inherited. In this, we are much alike.

House museums are odd hybrids. They represent lives carefully preserved: dropped in formaldehyde to be dissected. Yet in the best of them, that preservation retains the personality of
the original. There is a sense that they are still inhabited, as if the owner had just stepped out for a breath of fresh air and might be back at any moment, surprised to have visitors cordoned off by velvet ropes. In Jackson’s office, my mother points out letters that are strewn about the desk haphazardly, opened, seemingly half-read. They are some of Jackson’s real letters, but they are also an illusion. As the war dragged on, Jackson advised his wife to return to her family’s home in North Carolina - all their things, letters most of all, would have been packed away. The personality on display isn’t Jackson’s, but some early curator of his life.

As she led me through the house, starting in the slave quarters and working our way up through the hierarchy of the 19th century home, my mother’s voice took on a practiced, professional rhythm. If you didn’t know her, if you hadn’t heard that voice light up at your wayward arrival or almost comically ominous as she sent you to your room, you might not catch the change. She can recite details about each room of the house from rote, but still seems interested. She can pause to answer questions and pick up again right where she left off. She is good enough that she does not seem practiced at all, as if she were just having a conversation.

Since I was visiting from graduate school, this tour was just for me, after hours. She and my father have lived in Lexington for years now, but somehow I had never gotten to see the tour. She was in her early 50s then - gray streaks in her dark brown hair, wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and mouth. She was plumper than she once was, but in a way that compliments – an effortless beauty. She seemed very much in her element.

After the tour, she told me some about what it is like to work there. “It's hard,” she said, “There is the Virginia that I love and the Virginia that I hate, and they seem to meet right here. There are still a lot of old racial attitudes. There are a lot of people that are still un-reconstructed. They'll come in and lean over to me and whisper how the war was really The War of Northern Aggression. Or people from the North will stop at the edge of the shop and joke: 'I'm a Yankee
are you sure it's okay to come in here?' Well, yes, aren't we over that? We weren't that different when the war started, we're certainly not that different now.”

She reflected for a moment before going on. “Not that I'm not affected. I still have these false 'Virginia aristocrat' feelings. I respond that way sometimes naturally, because my father ingrained it in us. That mythology is so powerful. As a Virginian I'm just as proud of Maggie Walker as I am of Jackson and Thomas Jefferson. But it's hard to reconcile since they both owned slaves and Maggie was the daughter of slaves.”

“Who is Maggie Walker?” I asked.

“Oh, son,” she said, “Do they not teach Black History anymore?”

3.

I was six when I first heard about James Johnston Pettigrew, Brigadier General, C.S.A. He was a 2nd-tier figure in the war, unless you hail from North or South Carolina, where he is, like Jackson, a Living Saint. And if unsubstantiated family legend can be believed, he is an ancestor on my father’s mother’s side.

He led the North Carolina portion of the brutal “Picket’s Charge” at the Battle of Gettysburg, where he was wounded for the second time during the war. The North Carolina side suffered so much that enthusiasts still call to rename the charge after Pettigrew, accusing the Richmond newspapers of the day of propagandizing. The next wound he received, while covering Lee’s retreat from Pennsylvania, would be mortal. He is still famous enough to have merited a brief appearance in the 1993 movie *Gettysburg*: his role portrayed by George Lazenby.

Though he is an ancestor on my fathers' side, I first heard of him from my mother. The surrounding circumstances have gone wherever it is that lost childhood memories go, but the
moment of telling is one of the clearest points of my life. I recall being in tears, having somehow just figured out that my ancestors must have owned slaves. I can remember being so proud before. My ancestors had been in Virginia since the 1600s! 350 years ago! I think, even at six, I liked the idea of continuity. I had a History: my friends only had Grandparents. Unfortunately, it didn't take long to find out that having continuity and identity comes with consequences.

I’m not sure I completely understood what Slavery really was, but I knew that it was bad - I knew it to be a stain so persistent, so insidious, that it could still stick, even to a child, even 130 years after it had been ended.

I rushed, snotty tears streaming, into our family room where my mother was reading by the fire, and catapulted myself into her lap. It was then that she told me about Pettigrew. He fought for the South, she said, but he had been against Slavery. Yes, we had slave-owning ancestors, but there was more to it than that. And here was Pettigrew, who fought because Carolina was his home, because he believed – wrongly, perhaps, but virtuously - that it was also his country and nation. He did not fight because he wanted to keep human beings like cattle. He, at least, thought it was a bad idea.

This comforted me. More than comforted - I was proud of it. I used it as ammunition against self-doubt. I used it as preemptive strikes against frustratingly accurate stereotypes of southern racism. I used it so I could have my history and eat it too.

But as I got older, I also saw in Pettigrew an identity which I could recognize, or wanted to recognize, in myself. Here was a man that loved his home and heritage so much that he would ultimately die for it, but who also didn’t get along with it. He fit but he didn’t fit - set just slightly apart, by some luck or by divine intervention. There but for the grace of God.

As it turned out, my mother was wrong.

4.
General Pettigrew, before he was General Pettigrew, served in the South Carolina legislature as a young man (he was destined to die at 35). He made a name for himself there, especially among those that supported moderation in the coming conflict. He was, like both Jackson and Lee and the majority of the South, at first against secession.

To that end, the Governor asked him to prepare a defense against the legislature's war hawks. They were trying to force the issue of secession by proposing the reopening of the foreign slave trade.

Some history: Slavery was very much alive and flourishing in South Carolina in the mid-19th Century. The trade though, and by “trade” (wholesomely mercantile, like “industry” or “production”) I mean the brutal kidnapping of men and women and children from their African homes, the transportation of said people across the Atlantic Ocean in chains and deadly conditions, and their sale at auction as if they were an untouched commodity that had been discovered - miracle of miracles! - under the sun-baked African dust like diamonds or gold: this murderous trade had been outlawed throughout these United States in 1808.

Pettigrew was not against Slavery as an Institution (sacred, venerable), he was against the resumption of the Slave Trade. And more than anything, he was against forcing a showdown between South Carolina and the Federal Government before all other options had been exhausted. His treatise, Report of the Special Committee of the House of Representatives of South Carolina..., As Relates to Slavery and the Slave Trade, is cloyingly paternalistic. It warns strongly against the damage the importation of “hideous barbarians” could do on the native stock. It warns of docile homegrown slaves being manipulated into rebellion by new arrivals. There is nothing southern society feared so much as a slave insurrection.

There are, as always, confounding variables. It is all too easy to dismiss the past, and once you start playing the game of History, “there is no one who is righteous, not even one.”
aim was to be persuasive, and he succeeded - the motion to resume the trade was defeated. The Report was even considered unusually moral because it did not deal only in the relative economic costs to slaveholders but deigned to consider the well-being of the slaves at all. But even considering political stratagems, even allowing that is was 1857, one could not say that Pettigrew was anti-slavery.

My mother didn’t even recall the original conversation. Smiling, she said, “It’s funny what kids remember.”

“Actually,” I said, “it’s not that funny at all. In fact, this might be the exact opposite of funny.”

She shrugged: “I was probably just trying to make you feel better.”

5.

Still. There remained, annoyingly, much to admire about Pettigrew. Here’s a short list of his more estimable accomplishments:

1. Fluent in English, German, French, Italian, and Spanish.
2. Graduated with a perfect scholastic record from the University of North Carolina - at the age of 19.
3. After college, named Assistant Professor to Matthew Maury at the United States Naval Academy (cataloguing stars).
4. Graduated from University of Berlin with degree in Civil Law.
5. Learned to read Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic.
6. Practiced Law in South Carolina.
7. Elected to the South Carolina State Legislature.

8. Loved literature, wrote eloquently and passionately.


10. Argued publicly for religious tolerance.

He was brilliant, brave, and born with a strong sense of moral responsibility. He was also sickly, bookish, excessively polite, and shy around women. Though certainly more gifted, it was all too easy to see him as 19th century version of myself.

6.

In the years after the war, an ideology developed, known as the *Lost Cause*. Essentially, believers in the *Lost Cause* make much of the fact that the North had more men and more resources, claiming that their ultimate victory was won through attrition, not through skill or bravery. Much is made of Southern Generals (modern Chivalric Knights) and their superior skill, high moral character, their dauntless courage, their gentlemanly behavior. Much is also made of the Union Generals’ drunkenness, lechery, and stupidity. Lee and Jackson are especially god-like (Grant and Sherman especially Demonic): any mistakes they made become the fault of subordinates. And the role of slavery in starting the conflict is diminished in favor of the more palatable disagreement on the Rights of States to determine their own separate destinies.

Much of this is fiction. It is understandable fiction, considering the absolute ruin of the South in the years after the war. They had lost the war, their economic way of life, and hundreds of thousands of sons, all in four short years and for an ideal that suddenly seemed dishonorable in
the light of day. It was a truth that would have been extraordinarily hard to face. It was
cowardice, but a cowardice that is hard to fault.

However, the myth remains remarkably persistent. Even in the 1980s and 90s, even with
parents not particularly nostalgic about the Confederacy, I still grew up with it. I knew that the
South had out-maneuvered and out-fought their Union counterparts. It was immutable fact that
the North could not possibly have won without their greater manpower and industrial resources.
What keeps the myth alive is that it is grounded in some fact. For example, Lee publicly
accepted responsibility for the devastating loss at Gettysburg, thereby discrediting attempts to
shift the blame to his subordinates and proving that the South was hardly infallible militarily. But
while that can be evidence refuting one aspect of the Lost Cause, it reinforces Lee’s image as an
honorable man. In this way, any counter-evidence gets turned against itself.

Pettigrew too, seems to have earned his place as an exemplar of chivalry. He had a deep
sense of civic duty. He believed that his class demanded it of him. If God had seen fit to give
him the benefits of education and training, it was his duty to lead those who had not. He believed
that men were not born equal, but that each had a responsibility to serve with whatever gifts he
had been given: an Aristocrat of Virtue, not birth. When war came, he refused to accept a
commission and enlisted as a common soldier. He was later forced to accept a command before
he thought he had earned it, because his superiors recognized his ability.

And he believed in freedom to a degree that is hard to imagine today. To Pettigrew,
government was a contract between free individuals for the purpose of creating a better ordered
society. The central government only had responsibility to defend this freedom in the face of
foreign invasion. The attempt by Washington to control internal affairs wasn’t seen by him as an
attack on the South or even on Carolina, but as an attack on his chosen way of life as a free
person. He was an idealist: blind to shades of gray. His brilliance and his high moral standard made him so. If all men were Pettigrew, government would be unnecessary.

His preferences during his travels in Europe help to illuminate some of his opinions about what was happening at home. He found he despised northern Germany, and Great Britain even more. He saw in their industrialized cities great wealth next to great poverty - the pursuit of money at the expense of human dignity. He hated what he saw as an aristocracy of wealth alone, without responsibility. He saw the same in the rapidly industrializing American North.

This, to him, was not just something to be lamented - it was an evil to be fought. In his book he wrote: “Adieu to a civilization which reduces men to machines, which sacrifices half that is stalwart and individual in humanity to the false glitter of centralizations, and to the luxurious enjoyments of a manufacturing, money age!” He was hardly a populist, and I am hardly an aristocrat, but we meet in a mutual hatred of the mechanisms of greed, of “gain at any cost.”

When the South initiated war, to him it was not the South that had rebelled, but the North that had betrayed American honor in favor of economic gain.

During his travels in Europe as a young man, he came to admire the Spanish nobility. He judged that they had earned their place in society by a devotion to their duty as military and civic leaders. Where he criticized French and German nobility in his journals for their strutting and lack of purpose, the only words he had to say against the Spanish was their lack of social mobility. He felt that a man was an aristocrat by acting like one. This odd blend of landed aristocracy with republicanism matches the Lost Cause view that Pettigrew’s planter class held of themselves. That it is not only historically inaccurate, but historically impossible, doesn’t make it less of a noble vision. And Pettigrew seems to have lived it in his own life.

Seen from his point of view, his reasons for going to war were not wrong. I can’t say that I would have gone as easily or as quickly. But if I felt my home, my family, and my way of life
to be threatened by a rapacious power, even if that power came from within the United States, I would.

7. "I assure you that the most unsafe place in the Brigade is about me. The post of danger is certainly the post of honor."

The first time he was wounded he was shot in the neck by a Minie ball. The heavy soft lead had ripped across his windpipe, throat, shoulder. When his men rushed to save him, he ordered them back into ranks. I wonder how he spoke, with blood rushing from his neck. He must have waved at them, angrily, his hands flinging gobs of his own blood. He collapsed. They retreated, and left him for dead.

He slipped in and out of consciousness. At some point he was shot again in the chest, then bayoneted in the leg. Dying there under the hot Virginia sun, I think he dreamed himself an Andalusian Prince: sitting, feet in the sand, on the edge of the Mediterranean Sea. His curved, Toledo-forged sword laid next to him, while he read an illustrated copy of The Hadith Bayad wa Riyadh. The sun was setting. He strained to see the text.

Union soldiers discovered him alive and took him prisoner - saving his life.

The second time, his horse was shot out from under him. He advanced on foot. His men died all around him - 1,600 rounds shot at them, smacking soft and wet into earth and bellies. Artillery boomed. A literary man, he must have thought: *Half a league, half a league, half a league onwards. Into the Valley of Death* - but then the cannon loaded grapeshot and his men fell down in the hundreds. His hand was crushed: bloody, and broken. Useless, but he kept on. Useless.
On the way back he ran into General Lee. Using his good hand he saluted, but said nothing.

That should have been the end for him: the charge, blood pumping, fearless, bronze Napoleons roaring like thunder in his ears. But the end wouldn’t come for another week. He was guarding the escape back across the Potomac. How many times have I crossed that river, careless? But there is blood in that water. Union cavalry were closing in. He was standing with the pickets - in the front - as the Horsemen burst from the trees. He fired his pistol and drew his sword. It wasn’t an attack, just a raid, but there were enough. He was shot in the stomach at close range and dragged to the rear. They offered to leave him, his men. The Union had better doctors, better hospitals. And he was a prize. But he refused, so they carried him to Virginia. He died three days later.

His Division died with him.

8.

Another tour. My mother is shepherding my siblings and I through Lee Chapel. In the back chamber there is a statue of a reclining Lee, tomb-like, though he is meant to be sleeping. He is in repose, a blanket in marble pulled up around his shoulders. The curator tells us that after the war he refused to appear in his uniform ever again, though a painting of him in full dress uniform hangs in the next room. The chamber is festooned with Confederate Battle Flags. Lee is praised for his willingness to accept responsibility for defeat, but his subordinates are blamed anyway. In the same way, he is fondly remembered for his commitment to peace after the war, yet he lies in state with full military honors.
Still. The flags are held by rough sticks like one might find anywhere. “There were poles,” the curator says, “but they were blown apart by cannon fire.” The flags were picked up and thrust onto these sticks, and carried on - all under fire. How can I not be moved?

These men - Lee, Jackson, Pettigrew - exhibited all the traits of heroism. They embodied the myth of Southern chivalry: made it possible by giving it a grounding in fact. Yet, ultimately, they failed, and history has not remembered their good, but only that they were wrong. As much as I want to claim that heritage, as much as I want to claim Pettigrew as my flesh and blood, my mirror, I can’t. He doesn’t deserve it.

The most important moral question since the penning of “all men are created equal,” was how to deal with the hypocrisy of slavery. The Revolutionary generation passed it along, but the next generation wasn’t up to the task either. To excuse either Pettigrew or Lee because they were “men of their time” is insulting to their intellects. They were both moderates, but there can be no moderation when it comes to evil.

How could he write about men reduced to machines and not see the irony? How could he hate London bankers that would starve men to make a profit and not think of the slaves on his brother’s plantation? It was wrong, he said, speaking of Southern prejudice against catholic Spain and Italy, to force cultures into narrow labels or preconceptions. How could so expansive a mind be so blind to its own inconsistency?

My mother had been dealing with it for twice as long as I had, and much more directly. And in a generation it didn’t seem to be getting any better. If anything it was getting worse: the specter of States’ Rights is again parading over historical fact. In 2010, the Governor of Virginia
declared April Confederate History month. Not a word about Slavery. Not until there was a controversy. It is still 1870 in Virginia.

Maybe it’d be easier to drop it altogether. Let the past be past. But it is hard when you dream of Blue Ridge Mountains, of Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death! speeches resounding from pulpits and Houses of Burgess, even of gray-coated bravery. I find I can’t just walk away from dogwood trees, and cardinals, and Sic Semper Tyrannis. I can neither reject it nor accept it out of hand. The past is on my conscience, and because it is, I must struggle with it.

“It’s like walking a tight rope,” she agreed. “I feel very conflicted. I fight with myself. I grew up with the Lost Cause, and I want to be proud of my heritage like anyone else. But it was wrong.”

“How do you deal with it?” I asked.

“I try to tell the truth.”

9.

It occurs to me that after what we have been through, Virginia and the rest of the South should be the new home of tolerance and respect: a bastion of cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity. If anyone has been taught the evils of racism and cultural pride, it is us. The North, because of the war, has not had to face the shame of slavery, though for 200 years they were just as culpable. After all, it was slave cotton that northern immigrant children spun through the looms of the textile mills. It was greed on all sides that allowed Slavery to flourish as long as it did. Yet, because of the war, the North has not had too look into that abyss, but we have.

Or, we should have, since it is right in front of us: we cannot help but feel it still. We were taught a lesson, but we didn't want to listen, and every generation seems to willfully forget.
The abyss is still there, waiting. But we don't have the courage to look. It is a terrible, gnawing thing. The right thing, the *honorable* thing would have been to end slavery, whatever the cost. But they were too afraid of their own guilt. That the Lost Cause is still believed is proof enough that we are still afraid.

9.

Just outside Lee Chapel, there is a grave site, where Lee’s horse Traveler is buried. The grave is simple: just a plot of ground that has been covered in gray stones, like a piece of cobblestone street in the dirt. There is a small placard, but no headstone. It is covered in pennies, all face down. My mother explains: “It has sort of become a tradition. They are saying, ‘Lincoln can kiss Lee’s horse’s ass.’”

It was not what Lee would have wanted, but it fit. For all their nobility, the legacy of the men who fought for the South has been lost in a scattering of ignorance and misplaced anger, dropped as reverence on the grave of the long dead. As extraordinary as they were, it was the fault of Pettigrew and his generation that it had come to this. He believed that noble men had noble responsibilities, but he had failed in his. He was a good man, but he wasn’t nearly good enough.

He couldn’t tell the truth, so we have to.
Each morning, the Hing Ta Chinese Restaurant serves fried dumplings in a field of purple and white flowered tobacco: just next to where Joe Basset keeps his pet pig. Big trucks, overflowing with produce and Swedish furniture, fire their fog horns when the little boy waves from under the overpass - he is plowing his daddy’s fields in the Chick-Fil-A parking lot: one mule in the morning, one mule at night. In wide-brim hats and yellow scarves, the boy scouts take a record breaking fourteen mile hike around the big Wal-Mart shopping center, stopping for root beers at Lattie’s Grocery before rushing home to chop wood for the stove. At Red Oak High School, with the bases loaded, one player makes a barehanded catch deep in the corn, while another is stopped short by a chain-link fence with corporate sponsorship - a Hardee’s Grand Slam home run. In a cul-de-sac forest of single-family homes, Old Man Wilkins takes measurements along the edge of his machete, calculating the price of lumber in his head. The lane of rose bushes that Mama planted leads right up to the porch of the new Mexican restaurant, where your grandfather sits and smokes Dunhill tobacco from the pipe he gave up fifty years ago, blowing smoke rings to make you laugh. “I’m the only one who remembers it,” he tells you, “There’s no one else left.”
Brian ripped a match out of its book. Instead of drawing the head across the strike strip, he folded the book’s cover over so that it pinched the match against the strip. He pulled sharply, lighting it with a satisfying *pop-hiss*. Then he drew the flame to the pipe between his teeth, pulling the smoke through the stem and puffing it out the side of his mouth - crinkling strips of tobacco into ash.

“Did you see Gaiman’s blurb on Lewis?” I asked him, as he passed me the matches. He shook his head. I folded the matchbook over, lighting a match the same way he had.

Neil Gaiman and C.S. Lewis were both favorite authors of ours. Because we had grown up in a moderate Christian home that favored education, C.S. Lewis - medieval scholar and author of Christian apology and fiction - was practically a member of the family. He was on every shelf and inevitably wedged into most conversations, like a revered but absent uncle. His popular series for children, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, are some of the first books I can remember devouring. Gaiman was a later addition, a fantasy writer first famous for writing mainstream comic books geared toward adult audiences. Ever since I had discovered *The Sandman* comics in college, and become an avid reader of his blog, he too had become a common topic of conversation for the two of us. We had been thrilled to discover that Gaiman listed Lewis as one of his major influences. As hopeful writers ourselves, we dreamed of being the next in line.

“No, I didn’t see it,” he said. “I haven’t been keeping with things lately, because of the wedding.”
“Right. Of course,” I said. My brother’s impending nuptials were the last thing I wanted to talk about. At the time I was 22; Brian was 24. In just three short years, I’d be happily nuptialled myself, but you couldn’t have convinced me that at the time. I quickly moved on.

“His quote went something like this: ‘No matter what other books for children I’ve read, the Chronicles always stood out. Narnia seemed like a place you could actually get to.’”

“That’s what I love about Gaiman - he’s such a fan,” Brian said, letting out a thick puff of smoke.

“I’ve always felt that way,” I said, looking down at the picnic table where we were sitting. I sucked hard on my pipe to try and keep it from going out, but gave up and let it die. “Like I might open a door one day and step into Narnia.”

Brian just nodded and pushed the matches toward me again. The pipe was his - a spare he’d bought in a tobacconist’s shop during his summer at Oxford. As usual, I had left mine at home. “You have to draw deeply on that one,” he said, “or it’ll go out every time.”

We had always been close. These days, instead of running off to play with our plastic swords out in the woods, we wandered off to smoke our pipes, and to talk. We talked about everything that is worth talking about, and most things that aren’t: books, music, politics, religion, history, girls, alcohol. We used to joke that all our conversations would eventually come around to C.S. Lewis, comic books, and the Fall of the Roman Empire.

On this particular day, I was avoiding the real subject: Brian was getting married. We were in upstate New York discussing the possible reality of imaginary worlds, because that was easier than facing the reality that everything would change in just a few days.

It's not that I had anything against my soon-to-be sister-in-law. I didn’t know her too well then, but on the few occasions she’d spent with the family, we had all liked her. It wasn’t the thought of Brian getting married to Lori that bothered me, but the thought of him getting
married at all. It was fine as a concept, but I saw the two of us as a team, a dynamic duo, but there was so much that we had yet to do. When were we going to hike the Appalachian Trail together? When were we going to travel across the country, living only on our wits while we gathered material for the Great American Graphic Novel? Was she going to come along?

We are all resistant to change, but I tend to take it personally - as if Time marched along just to piss me off. As an example, consider Christmas:

We in the Wilkins family have always had a number of odd Christmas practices - a mishmash of my parents’ equally weird traditions. Though the rest of the family seems capable of enjoying these without taking them too seriously, I have always guarded them zealously. For instance: on Christmas Eve, after church, it is my sister’s duty and pleasure as the youngest to hang the first stocking. We all follow, one at a time, from youngest to oldest. We always watch some version of *A Christmas Carol*, and eat a seafood feast. Though we are now too old for either, my mother reads *The Night Before Christmas* from an old illustrated book that she used to own - my father reads Chris van Allsburg’s *Polar Express*. For years, I struggled against the increasingly late time for Christmas morning, long after I was old enough to appreciate the extra sleep. A mad rush to the tree is (of course) completely out of the question.

Though I have softened my stance somewhat since I got married, I was at the height of my vigilance that Christmas before Brian’s wedding. The wedding wasn’t for another seven months, but already I dreaded what was coming. I was painfully conscious that that Christmas was likely to be the last Christmas we would have our traditional unit. So I walked around moping: muttering things like, “This is the last Real Christmas we’ll ever have,” or “This is the last Real Christmas ornament I’ll ever hang,” or “You better like that - it’s the last Real
Christmas present you’ll ever get!” Somewhere inside, I knew that the coming change was normal, healthy. But I didn’t care. I liked the way things were.

For months, as the Holy Matrimony hurtled ever closer, I had tried to think of the perfect gift to give my brother. I couldn’t just give him something off of their gift registry. A wok or a toaster - nice enough from a cousin or a friend - would have been insulting. I had to get him something that explained everything I was thinking - something that would cement our relationship for years to come, wives or not. It was stressful.

After a few months of paralysis, I finally decided to get him a book of poetry. He is a poet, and at the time had just started his MFA in Poetry at the University of New Hampshire. I gave him a book of C.S. Lewis’s poetry that our parents had had around the house while we were growing up. The book had been published posthumously, because even Lewis didn’t like his poetry, but I knew that it would mean something to Brian. I found a first American edition in hardback, whose value (if it had any) I ruined by inscribing a full page.

I should have made it short - Congratulations! Love, Ben 08/06 - but once I started it was hard to stop. Each word led to the next. I don’t remember what I wrote, though I filled the inside blank page from top to bottom: my scrawl wide and tall near the top, crushingly small as I reached the end. I know that at some point I included a reference to the TV show The West Wing. There is an episode where the President’s speechwriter Sam says that his favorite writer is Toby, the Communications Director and his boss. Get it? I may as well have said. I’m Sam, and you’re Toby! We’re both writers! That won’t change, will it?

On the day of the wedding, I got up early and cornered our little sister, Beth. I needed her help, because I had to give the dreaded Best Man Speech at the reception, and I had no idea
what I was going to say. I am by nature a procrastinator. This time, though, it had been weighing me down for weeks. But, as for Brian’s gift, I was immobilized by the enormity of the undertaking. Not only did I feel the need to once again capture the spirit of our relationship, I had to do it in front of a crowd. I’d had pen and paper ready to go the instant the fireman’s bell of my inspiration clanged on. It hadn’t. The problem, predictably, was that Brian is my usual sounding board for all writer’s block related complications.

Desperately, I rounded on my sister. As a photographer, sculptor, and only real artist in the family, Beth is by far the most creative person among us. I hoped to siphon off some of her inspiration in order to jump start my own.

“Help me!” I demanded.

“Okay, don’t panic,” she said, thinking. Suddenly light flashed in her eyes, and her hands leaped up like she might push me. She smiled. An epiphany was striking; I could see its electricity running through her. I took a deep breath. Everything was going to be okay. “I know! You could do an interpretive dance of his life!”

This was not the epiphany I was looking for.

“I’m sorry?”

“No, it would work. Think about it. Brian is born!” she said, and mimed a remarkably Brian looking birth, as disgusting as that sounds. I just stared at her. She was two minutes and 15 years into Brian’s life before I realized she was joking. I started laughing, then she started laughing. It was twenty minutes before we could look at each other without cracking up, the original reason almost completely forgotten.

And then I knew what I had to say. The speech had to be funny. The only way I could express the seriousness of what I wanted - needed - to say was through humor. The only way that
I could say, “I don’t want this to happen, but of course I do,” was to laugh at the paradox of it - at myself, at Brian. I scribbled down some notes.

Though there were some comments of “What an unusual wedding!” from the more conservative quarters of the extended family (owing to Stephanie, a female groomsperson), the wedding went smoothly. My mother sang. My sister was the prettiest bridesmaid. I didn’t lose the rings. Both Lori’s mother and my father are ministers, so they split duties. Lori was beautiful. Brian couldn’t stop smiling.

At the reception, the Maid of Honor’s speech was good enough to make me wish I hadn’t been a gentleman and let her go first. I walked up and took the microphone. My voice was steady, but my hands were shaking.

I shaped the speech like a letter to Lori, telling her all the impressive genetic traits her future children could expect from the Wilkins side of the family. After each trait I would cite an example from Brian’s past. For example: your children will receive an almost supernaturally heightened awareness, evidenced by the time that Brian knocked himself unconscious by walking into a No Parking sign. Or: they will have cat like reflexes, just like Brian did when he tried to flip from the top bunk to the bottom and ended up spraining his back on the floor.

It loses something without the delivery, but I assure you, I killed. It probably didn’t hurt that there was an open bar. I don’t want to brag (or maybe I do, a little) but whenever anyone who was at the wedding talks about it, my speech inevitably comes up. I had plenty of material at Brian’s expense, which went over well. But I had something serious to say as well. At the rehearsal dinner, Brian’s friend Ian had made a short speech. In it, he pointed out that when you are Brian’s friend, you are treated like family. So I pointed out how, when you are Brian’s
family, you become something more - you become friends. For years I had been tagging along, trying to catch up to him. Instead of telling me to get lost, he let me in.

So I gave this to Lori. I relinquished my title as Brian’s Best Friend, his confidant, his fellow adventurer, as all that I meant when I called myself his brother. My voice was shaking by the end, so I sat down as quickly as I could. I felt emptied - relieved, but still sad that it had to be.

“I have always liked the Norse idea about the end of the world,” my brother once said to me. It was the kind of thing he would say, without provocation.

“Yeah?” I asked. There was no stopping him once he got going.

“The gods knew that Ragnarök was coming. They knew that the enemy, the Giants, were going to win, but they still kept fighting.”

“That’s depressing,” I said. “Why even keep going, knowing you are going to lose?”

“Because, what else is there?”

Predictably, the Christmas following the wedding wasn’t nearly as bad as I had thought it would be. Everyone was there: my parents, Brian and Lori, Beth and her then-fiance Zach, my then-fiancee Julie and I. We held on to as many traditions as we could. We ate oyster stew (though we now serve an egg casserole as another option). We got up around 8, and we passed our presents out one at a time.

I confess that I still felt a dull sense of impending doom. I feel it still. Then, I think I feared that that Christmas was the Last Real Christmas, because the next I’d have to rotate to Julie’s family and their terrible practice of opening presents all at once. But now that I’m over that hurdle, I’m still not completely convinced. Maybe this year will be the Last Real Christmas. Maybe next year.
My brother and I did find some time to sneak away from the house and smoke, just the two of us. We had to share his pipe, because I’d left mine at home. We talked about C.S. Lewis, the latest trends in graphic literature, and somehow worked in the fall of the Roman Empire.

But we also talked about the graphic novel we had started writing together. We weren’t going to hike the Appalachian Trail or travel around the country. Because he has Lori and I have Julie, because we live far away and have to work over the internet, because we have other priorities, the work is slow going. But we are working, together, and not just dreaming about it.

And even that doesn’t matter. We read each other’s writing. We talk about how great it would be to have kids the same age. We privately hope our wives’ jobs will move us closer. In short - we are still brothers. Things may change around us, but that never will.
PLAYER PIANO

My mother was a player piano - a pneumatic pianola.

At night she would softly unwind long scrolls of lullabies. On rainy days she would pluck out rolled up cylinders of show tunes while I capered about the house.

On Sundays, we would put on performances. She would operate the music and I would sing or dance, and always, as a comedic finale, I’d put a feather in my cap and pretend to pound out Yankee Doodle. We did this so often that now I don’t have to pretend - I really can play Yankee Doodle. I just close my eyes and imagine that each key is anticipating the slightest tap of my fingers.

As it turns out, my mother was exactly one half-step out of tune. I didn’t learn this until years later, when my wife pointed out that I was singing off-key. Now I sing what is to me a half-step flat, so as not to stand out.

It occurs to me that we all betray our mothers, just so.
There are ants in my kitchen.

Actually, there are ants all over the apartment.

Look too long at a speck of dust, a spot on the carpet, and it might start to move.

I walked in late one evening to find that my roommate had left the remains of his dinner on the counter. Millions of little black-bodied ants had swarmed all over it, working hard to break the big pieces of leftover pizza into ant-sized bites to take back to their gluttonous Queen.

Meanwhile, my roommate was watching TV on the conch.
Dude. We have ants.

Yeah, I know.

So...maybe we should do something about it.

They're just doing their job.

Their job?

Yeah, you know. They're just cleaning up. That way we don't have to.

I really need to move out.
But then again, moving out would have been giving up, giving in to an Ant invasion.

My apartment is my territory. I don't go into their hill and steal their food.

And if I did, I bet they'd try and stop me.

These ants had knowingly broken the ancient accord between all animals -
broken frequently, sure, but never without a full knowledge of the consequences.

If you stay out of my house, then I'll stay out of yours.
Humans

Any transgression was an open declaration of war -
A war that I'd apparently be waging alone.
Actually, this was the Second Ant War in the contest for domination of my apartment.

The first had been fought a few weeks before, just after we moved in.

I was sitting at my desk one day when I felt a tickling across my feet.

It was that tickling that always seems like something else - something innocent like a bit of paper blown by the fan, harmlessly drifting back and forth.

Of course, it never is.
I rushed to the basement, hoping the previous tenants had left a can of Raid behind on one of the laundry room shelves.

The shelf was covered with poisons, traps, and even some device (a.k.a. The Nuclear Option) that declared in capital letters that I should only use it outdoors and away from any pets.

So many Weapons of Insect Annihilation left me giddy. I could hardly decide which chemical death to drop on my unsuspecting foes.

My landlord had left me a dizzying array of weapons – all chemical warfare.

Instead, I found an arsenal.

I sighed and settled for a spray can, saving the big guns as a last resort.

Back in my room, I emptied the can – killing every ant I could see and covering the carpet in a mushroom cloud of chemicals for good measure.

In my zeal, I forgot that bug spray isn't that good for humans either.

... TONY!
Weeks later, the ants had returned—possibly looking for revenge.

Bring it on.

I sat on them with the same wild abandon that I had before in my room—expecting the same results.

These ants, though, were stronger than their forebears.

Either that or they were just more stubborn.

It took twice as much spray to clear them out of the kitchen as it did to get them out of my room.

But finally, I did it. The long war was over. My apartment was mine once more.
The next day I found a few strays on the counter and quickly dispatched them with my fingers.

I laughed and shook my head at them.

SILLY ANTS. WON'T YOU EVER LEARN?

Then I opened the dishwasher, to find them swarming.
The God-like power of life and death is a heady brew, and I confess that I felt a twisted glee when I shut the dishwasher and opened up the flood gates.

I must have snuffed out the lives of hundreds of my fellow creatures, without thinking twice.

Perhaps, my power as far above the ants' as I suppose that God's power is above mine, I should have pulled one ant aside and given him the blueprints for an Ant Ark - so many cubits by so many cubits.

But I didn't bother.

Righteous!

I had never intended to hold back the hand of righteous judgment for sins committed against my sacred kitchen.
In fact, I felt their persistence had gone too far, so I fetched The Nuclear Option from its place in the basement.

The Fat Man

Having already killed all the visible ants, there was no trail left to follow to wherever they were getting in, so I went outside to have a look around.

I found them easily enough, in the front yard marching steadily in a long column from somewhere in my bushes toward the house, as yet unaware of their comrades' doom.

I restrained myself from mowing the bushes down so I could find their evil lair, but only just.

Evil Lair

I would have to settle for covering each point of entry with as much chemical death as I could pump, hoping that it would be enough.
It was one of those hot, humid Virginia days where being outside feels like being covered in a warm, wet blanket.

So I paused before I began my grisly labor, stretching in the sunshine and looking around.

It was pleasant enough, in a sleepy way, as long as I wasn't stupid enough to do anything like move.

I noticed that the outdoor spigot was steadily dripping water.

Just as I was about to walk over and shut it off, a squirrel leaped from a tree onto my fence, tumbled gracefully to the ground where my hose had created a small puddle, and began to drink.

I have always felt that squirrels have a noble quality about them, their fluffy tails waving in challenge like a medieval king's banner.

There was really nothing noble about this one's scruffy tail, but I found I had an attachment to it already.

It stopped drinking when I was so inconsiderate as to make a noise, cocked its head towards me as if wondering whether I was threat enough for it to run, and then, deciding that I wasn't, turned back to its easily stolen drink.

After a time, it jumped away.
when it did, I noticed its immodestly bared teats and thought,

I was so moved that I found I couldn't turn off my spigot.

Please, sir, I want some more.

I couldn't deny a mother squirrel an easily accessible source of water.
Then, with a sigh, I set to murdering as many ants as I could get my hands on.

Of course, they were back within the week.
I once read an article that explained how early observers of ants thought that their complex social behavior proved a human kinship.

They saw that certain ants performed certain tasks, and ascribed them a willful Division of Labor worthy of Adam Smith. They have identifiable leaders, soldiers, workers— even undertakers.

Later, the magazine said, this was disproved by the discovery that ants communicate through the release of chemical pheromones that actually cause their behavior.
For example, when an ant dies, she releases a pheromone that causes the undertaker ant to find her by smell.

The undertaker then removes her to an ant graveyard.

Almost all ants are female.

This, I was told, is simply a way of protecting the colony as a whole, in case she died of a poison injection that could have spread. I wonder, though, are we so very different?

For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

For all our ceremony, why do we bury our dead?
From our point of view, pheromone communication proves that ants are not their own creatures the way we are ours.

But I wonder if God (or angels, or even aliens) would look down on us from their high vantage point and say,

Oh, they can only communicate through vocal chords and gestures.

“MEEP MOP

They aren’t like us at all.”
HUMAN SOCIETY

We'll open colonies, like Ants, anywhere in the world, adapt to any terrain, find a way to use whatever resources are available in order to survive.

ANT SOCIETY

Seen from above, our societies must appear to have the same kind of determined expansionism.

The only place we've outdistanced our smaller cousins is in Antarctica, where the ability to frequently fly in fresh provisions gives us a leg up.

Total Ant Biomass

Ants are everywhere else, and according to some estimates, make up about 20% of the animal biomass in any given location.

Everything Else
Some species of ant even employ farmers and shepherds.

There is a species that feeds off a particular fungus, which they cultivate by growing on carefully selected leaves. If the fungus won't grow from a particular leaf, that leaf will no longer be selected.

Other ants feed off aphids that secrete a kind of honey. They follow the aphids around, guarding them from predators and tapping them with their antennae, causing them to drop yet more honey.

When my grandfather was young, it was his job to milk the cows every morning, and I am forced to wonder - how is this different? Except that with ants, it's really disgusting.

Even more like us perhaps, many species of fungus will make war on one another, fighting for shared natural resources.

"Attack!"
In contrast, besides being closer on the evolutionary chain, squirrels and humans seem to have little in common.

Instead of building complex societies, squirrels live most of their lives in a frantic search for anything they can stuff into their mouths.

While they’re not eating, they’re just chewing, since they have to keep their teeth razor sharp, and because their teeth never stop growing unless they are gnawed down. This means that they’ll chomp down on anything they can get.

For all I know, the same Mama Squirrel that I am supplying with water is also the one that takes such pleasure in chewing through my trash bags and scattering random bits of garbage across my lawn.
Squirrels frequently cause power outages by climbing cables into transformers and electrocuting themselves.

They've knocked out NASDAQ twice.

VARMINTS

Squirrels are rodents: for all the supposed nobility of their tails, they are essentially tree rats.

They are dumpster divers and scroungers, whose constant chatter sounds like laughter.

And if you've ever heard it, coming home from a long, bad day, you know that they're not laughing with you, they're laughing at you.

HA HA

Chitter Chitter HA HA

HA HA

Chitter

GOOD GRIEF!

HEY BEN. YOU SUCK!
For all that, I go out of my way not to hit the stupid rats when they jump out in front of my car, and I feel bad if I do.

I have never felt the slightest remorse for crushing an ant.

There's something in a squirrel that I can relate to that an ant simply doesn't have.

Is it that we are both mammals? Is it because squirrels are furry and cute? And why should I think they are cute?

Perhaps, though we have a commonality of society with ants, we lack a commonality of soul.

We have a connection with squirrels, though they are little like us in form or function, because they are like us in spirit - somewhere, something, indefinable.
BUT WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.

The Bible tells us, beautifully, that we are made in God's image.

Clearly we would be far below an omnipotent Creator in stature, in our capacity for imagination, in sheer power.

SO, IF WE ARE NOT GOD LOOKALIKES, THEN HOW ARE WE MADE IN HIS IMAGE?

Does he see in us a superficial connection, a commonality of mere matter?

Man, thou hast made a mess of mine garden!

Or are we to him like the squirrel - annoying, foolish, but sometimes noble, and lovable whatever else?

But, verily verily, I say unto thee - I will leave the spirit running, for this stupidity mourns me to laugh imberly.

If I were God the world would have ended long ago: consumed in a deluge of annoyance.

Is that enough to stay the hand of judgement?
As I look at humanity and our love of death, I doubt that we are either cute enough or ridiculous enough to be spared or forgiven. We seem most like the ants - pests to be crushed by any civilized being.

I CAN ONLY HOPE THAT GOD IS NOT VERY MUCH LIKE ME AT ALL AND SEES IN US A QUALITY WORTH SAVING - Somewhere, Something, INDEFINABLE.
THREE BURNINGS

1.

A piece of half burned papyrus catches the wind, floats above the smoke and ash, comes to rest at Caesar’s sandaled feet. He steps on it; squashes the flame licking at its textured page. It was Greek - Aristotle? Plato? He can’t remember. What would his old tutor think of that? Desperate scholars rush by, their thin arms struggling under the weight of heavy water buckets. He thinks their weak eyes accuse him. Him. Hero of Rome. Conqueror of Gaul. It had been the right decision. What difference a few thousand scrolls up in smoke? The loss of his ships, that was the problem at hand. He knows he should hurry to see to his legions, but he finds he cannot tear himself away. So he lingers, and watches the Great Library burn.

2.

First the Mithreum was expunged of its taint, its bull sacrifices set free in the city, its bloody mysteries revealed as superstition. Then the phalli of Priapus were carried through the city to be mocked and cursed and used by vulgar youths as props to disgust and delight the city’s maidens. Finally, the Bishop of Alexandria led the mob to the Serapeum. “Burn it,” he said, and the crowd obeyed. Idols melted. Old priests rushed into the blackening heat to save their false god. No one bothered to stop them. Let Serapis save them if he could. It was all over and smoldering in a matter of hours - evidence of the Will of God. The Library was only remembered later, much to
the regret of the scholars - Christian and Pagan alike. It’s thousand thousand volumes but kindling in the firestorm. No matter.

3.

“What will you do?” the Greek asked. Amr ibn al ‘Aas replied, “I will do what my Caliph requires.” Days passed. His men waited, torches always ready. When the note came, Amr read it carefully, then passed it to the young man. It read: "If those books are in agreement with the Quran, we have no need of them; if they are opposed to the Quran, destroy them.” Amr saw the tears in the young man’s eyes and was moved to pity him. He said, “You may take one book,” marveling at his own generosity in defying his Caliph. “One book?” The Librarian - John Grammaticus, last Librarian of Alexandria - fell to his knees and wept. Amr shrugged and burned the library to the ground.
As we drove past St. Anthony's, a Roman Catholic church in Falls Church, VA, looking for a place to park, my fiancée Julie turned toward me and said, "You know, this is going to be awkward." *Awkward for me, you mean,* I thought, but didn't say. I knew she was only here for me - to support my misguided attempts to be even-handed in all things. We had come to St. Anthony's not so much because I wanted to, but because I felt an obligation. In the past few months, Julie and I had been making the effort to go to church together, mostly because I thought it was important. We came from opposite ends of the Christian spectrum. She was a somewhat non-practicing Catholic, attending church on Holy Days of Obligation. I was a "Barefoot and Born Again" Baptist - a minister's son. We were here because I thought things should be fair. She had come with me to baptist churches, so I felt I should return the favor - even if she had never asked me to.

I never felt that Julie should have to believe exactly what I believed for us to be together. But I did think it was important for us to find a way to go to church together - not for the sake of our souls but for the sake of future family cohesion. Growing up, church was the center of my communal life. My father was a Southern Baptist minister, so I was in church every Sunday morning, evening, and most Wednesday nights. Sunday school, Worship, Youth Choir, Bible Study, Softball, Food Drives, Mission Trips - these things defined and anchored my early life. Of course faith is something above and beyond church, but that doesn't mean that the social aspects aren't important. Julie grew up participating in church life as well. She went to confirmation classes, sang in the choir, and played hand bells. Whenever questions of religion would come up
between us though, we hit a brick wall. Was my father going to marry us? Or a priest? Would our children be baptized as infants or adults? To which youth group would they belong, if any? And more generally, if I go and she doesn't, does that become a part of my life that I can't share with her? Would it come between us?

Originally, I had wanted to compromise, and thought that taking her to the National Cathedral, officially part of the Episcopalian Church, would solve our problems. Ignorantly, I saw Episcopalians as a middle ground. They had the ritualistic trappings of Roman Catholicism in addition to some of the Protestant theology that was familiar to me. But, as Julie explained to me - "It's not Catholic." If it wasn't Catholic, then it was all the same to her. She'd happily come with me, but there was no use in my compromising, because her sacrifice would always be bigger. "I know it's not fair," she would say, "but it is what it is."

There is in Catholicism, more so than any other Christian denomination, a sense of tribal identity. What I mean by that is Catholics are Catholic, whatever they believe, and whether they go to church or not. You don't stop being Catholic. Julie was raised as such a Catholic. Whereas I was taught that other Christian traditions are denominations of a single religion – misguided perhaps, but part of the same whole - Julie was taught that anything but Catholicism was a completely different religion. It was something related to, but not quite Christianity. I'd never think of becoming an active member of a Lutheran church, for example, as a conversion. For many Catholics though, a "conversion" to any other form of Christianity would be a rejection of the Catholic culture and community. For me, and for most Protestants, church affiliation has everything to do with personal theology - what we believe. For Julie, it has everything to do with cultural identity. Therefore, it was better from her point of view not to go to at all than to commit to an Episcopalian church, no matter how close it was in form. She came to church with me for me, fully expecting to feel disconnected no matter where we were.
So for the most part, we went to Baptist churches, and I hoped that I would find one that she didn't mind too much - one where maybe she would like the people or the Pastor or the Choir, or something that would make me feel a little better about dragging her out of bed every Sunday morning. But every now and then the Middle Child in me would rise up and I would insist that for things to be fair, I needed to go with her to Mass. At first she agreed readily enough - willing to go wherever I wanted. But after a trip to a more conservative Catholic church, I was forbidden from going to Mass with her again.

It was my fault, really. The priest gave a homily on the infallibility of church doctrine - specifically on how foolish certain catholic women were who had recently claimed that they could be priests too, and then refused to believe the Pope when he excommunicated them. To my Protestant ears, this sounded not only like nonsense but like blasphemy. The Pope is a man, and, while I give him every right to strongly disagree with these women if he wants to, he is not God and therefore has no right to toss anyone out of Grace. Besides, as a Protestant I was a heretic and therefore an excommunicate too. I had to grit my teeth and clench my fists dramatically to keep from re-nailing Martin Luther's 95 Theses to the church door. I mumbled some very unchristian things and shot the priest dirty looks. Julie noticed.

Afterward I ranted and raved, fire and brimstone, in true Baptist fashion, hoping for sympathy. After all, it wasn't that Julie disagreed with me. But I overdid it. I hadn't meant to insult Catholicism exactly - just that particular priest, and maybe the pope, and oh maybe the whole idea of a hierarchical church where others could tell you what you could and could not believe. She was not amused.

It's not that I wouldn't have railed against a Baptist church I disagreed with, though. With Baptists, the railing is built in and we don't much mind who it happens to be directed against. An
old joke: I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. So I ran over and said, "Stop! Don't do it!"

"Why shouldn't I?" he asked.

"Well, are you religious or an atheist?" I asked.

"Religious," he said.

I said, "Me too! Are you a Christian or a Muslim?"

"Christian."

"Me too!" I said, "Are you Catholic or Protestant?"

He said, "Protestant."

"Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?" I asked.

"Baptist!"

"Wow!" I said, "Me too! Are you a Southern Baptist or an American Baptist?"

He said, "An American Baptist!"

I said, "Die, heretic scum!" and pushed him off.

Yet here we were at St. Anthony's. I'd managed to convince Julie to come along, despite the last attempt, because St. Anthony's offered Mass in Español. Julie is Mexican on her mother's side, though because of her fair skin most people assume that she too is Caucasian. It wasn't until I met her that I understood why they made us bubble "White: Non-Hispanic" on our standardized tests in elementary school. She marked the "Hispanic" bubbles herself, though culturally she is more American than anything else. Unless pressed, she wouldn't give herself a hyphen: Mexican-American, Hispanic-American. She speaks more Spanish than I do but she is hardly fluent. At the time, she had been making an effort to improve her vocabulary and wanted some extra practice. With this as an excuse, she reluctantly agreed to come along.
It is not so uncommon to hear a multitude of languages in a metropolitan area - snatches of Spanish, Chinese, or Korean, intermingled with the buzz of varied English dialects. But no matter how many minority cultures you see around you, it takes some effort to be completely surrounded by one. I found the need to whisper in Julie's ear - "We're the only ones speaking English." It was unsettling, because I was suddenly a foreigner, when minutes before I had had the easy confidence of being local. I put my arm around Julie, clinging to her as a fellow lost traveler. In that instant, I forgot that she was Hispanic too, as I so often did, and we seemed to be two American travelers, visiting the local iglesia on our vacation.

As we walked up to the glass doors that led into the sanctuary, I caught a glimpse of our reflection: white faces surrounded by a sea of brown. But Julie, I suddenly realized, actually looked more Hispanic in this crowd. Among a line-up of White Americans she'd have appeared as Anglo-Saxon as any of them, but here her Hispanic features seemed more prominent. She had been transformed by her environment - was it my imagination or did she have a new purse to her lips, a new swagger in her hips? But there was no mistaking my white, brown-bearded face. And I had chosen a Tweedish jacket to wear. Even without a tie, I had never looked so...Presbyterian.

Inside, the chapel was standing room only. We had arrived, along with a number of others, about 10 minutes into the service. The sanctuary at St. Anthony's is like many newer Catholic sanctuaries, which is to say, nothing like what I traditionally would think of as a church. It has a modern, rounded shape. The pulpit and the altar are both against a far wall, but instead of the pews marching in columns out like good orderly pews should, they fan out in a decadent half circle. Having dated a few Catholics in my lifetime, I have visited Catholic churches before, and they all had this shape to their sanctuaries. I think the purpose is more practical than aesthetic - since the Eucharist is usually administered one parishioner at a time in Catholicism, more rows between pews allow for more lines to form.
Though I tried to hide it, I couldn't help but be on edge. Protestant sanctuaries, for the most part, are indistinguishable from one another. That is, though there is much individual variation, there is little in the way of decoration that would make one think - "Ah, this is a Congregationalist sanctuary," or "this is a Methodist sanctuary." In St. Anthony's, however, I knew without a doubt that I was standing in a Catholic sanctuary. Besides the shape, there was the telltale Baptismal font in the front of the church - used on most days for dipping your fingers and making a wet sign of the cross as you enter or leave. Julie and I were the only ones I saw not partaking in this particular tradition, though I think she didn't only for my sake. But then Baptists would not be Baptists if we didn't do funny things with water, too.

The most unsettling physical difference to me is the statuary. All Catholic churches have at least one alcove or room devoted to their patron saint. This room is lit by candles alone, and has either a statue or a picture of the saint in an elevated position. Like my Protestant forebears, I am uncomfortable with what seems to be a nod toward paganism. Officially, Catholics don't worship Saints since they are in no way God. But Saints can intercede on one's behalf. One might pray to a Saint so that he or she would personally take your concerns to God. Each Saint has his or her own area of expertise. St. Anthony, for example, is the Saint of Lost or Stolen things. So if you've lost your car keys you might mumble a quick prayer: "Tony, Tony, turn around, my keys are lost and must be found." Hopefully, he'll take this request to the Man himself and before too long - poof! - there are your car keys hiding under the mail.

This has always seemed a bit sideways to me. Anthony of Padua was a devout man, no doubt, but why can't I ask Jesus (who is God in the Christian view) to help me find my car keys myself? Do I really need the middle man? The whole hope of Christianity is that God so longed for a personal connection with each of us that he was willing to die for it. If that is the case, then it strikes me as odd that we would want to deliver our messages via an Italian monk who just
happens to be good at finding things. It suggests that we can't accept our own message. God is Good. God loves us. But he's too busy to listen to prayers from ordinary people?

I like having a direct line to God. But it's not just the theological implications that bother me. It's the statues themselves. I spent a summer in Trinidad, which has a significant Hindu population. While there I was able to tour one of the temples. Outside there is an 80 ft. tall concrete statue of Hanuman, the monkey god of strength. Inside, there are a number of gods and goddesses, rendered out of various materials. Though we were allowed to take pictures of the statue outside, the indoor gods were more delicate, apparently. We could take pictures, but were forbidden from using flash photography, "as that might distract the gods from their duties." Part of me wanted to see if there were other ways to distract the gods - maybe if I jumped from around the corner quickly and yelled at them: "SURPRISE!" Or maybe I could sneak in behind them and tap them on the opposite shoulder. Or maybe they'd like to be distracted - I thought briefly of miming a trip down an escalator or doing a hand-puppet show.

Though Catholics are obviously not Hindus, I am reminded of this whenever I see the statues of the Catholic saints. Will St. Tony, temporarily blinded by flash photography, lose sight of my keys?

Of course, I'm hardly the only one who is put off by traditions other than the ones I'm used to. I once took Julie to a small, liberal, and actively ecumenical Baptist church, thinking that since she largely would have agreed with their politics, she'd have been more comfortable. That was a mistake, because her reticence had nothing to do with politics. Just as I am put off by decorations, she is put off by the lack thereof. She looks for hymns she knows, for creeds she can say by heart, for a prominently displayed crucifix. This church had none of those things. She leaned over to me and asked in a nervous whisper, "Do you think they can tell that I'm Catholic?"
I gave her a good looking over - checking her hands for stigmata. "I think you're probably okay," I said. I was making fun, because it was funny to think that we had Catholic radar, but I knew what she meant. No one wants to look like an outsider.

At St. Anthony's, I was actually grateful that I had been forced to stand by arriving late. Since all I could do was stand, I didn't have to worry about the confusion of when I was meant to sit or when I was meant to stand, or, worst of all, when I was meant to kneel. At a certain point in every Mass, and I have yet to be able to pick up on the necessary clues, the parishioners reach down to the bottom of the pew ahead of them to pull out a kneeling cushion attached to it.

I have never participated, but not for any moral conviction. I just don't know what to do. I'm sure I could manage the physical action, if only by copying those around me. Services seem to just happen organically, without clear direction, and an outsider has to keep a watchful eye in order to keep up. The congregation stands, it sits, it bursts into song, always at the same time as the previous week but always without warning. I can stumble along through most of that, but kneeling is beyond me. I understand the desire to be respectful before God, but there is something about it or about me that holds me back. I bow my head. I pray. But kneeling is too foreign: part of something that I am not. I don't think it is either right or wrong to kneel or not, but I am afraid of kneeling like a Baptist.

Still, as the priest began his homily, I saw the practicality of being in the club. Even though I couldn't understand a word the priest was saying, the service didn't really feel any different from any other Mass I had attended. There is comfort in that. Take it even further, as they did in years past, and put everything in Latin. If there were one church that spoke one language, everyone could feel at home anywhere in the world. More than that, they would be connected in tangible ways to millions of other souls. Protestants in general and Baptists in particular instill in their adherents a strong sense of individuality. In some ways this is joyously
freeing, but it can be a heavy burden. We try to encourage community as well as personal relationship with God, but there is no doubt that most Catholics have a sense of shared experience that most Baptists do not. Of course the reality is that even with a truly universal church, no one but the priest would speak Latin and then everyone else would be as lost as I was at the Spanish Mass. We'd all let our thoughts wander while the priest spoke mysteries to God that only he could understand.

It wasn't exactly unpleasant, though. The priest at St. Anthony's had a strong, melodically deep voice, and I was able to pick up a word here and there. He would say something and the crowd would react; I would try to piece together what he had said, based on their reaction. One minute hands shot up, and I looked at Julie helplessly - should I put my hand up to? Then I realized, he was asking people where they were from - Bolivia, or Mexico, or Columbia. I listened for "Southeast Virginia," but was disappointed.

Another time the congregation burst into laughter while I looked on, wanting to get the joke. Julie turned to me, smiling, and said, "He just told a joke about food!" She was excited because she had understood that much, at least, if not the punchline itself. I was excited when I heard the word "bueno" and thought, Oh - something is good. God, probably.

There were parts of the service that I could recognize. The congregation stood to recite the Apostles Creed: "We believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth...," but in Spanish. As a rule, Baptists are not fond of creeds - "Jesus is Lord" often cited as the only creed a Baptist needs to be a Baptist. But the Apostles Creed is a common recitation in many churches, Catholic and Protestant alike, and I had learned it somewhere along the way.

My father likes to tell a story of how in college he was taking a test for a class in Ancient Greek. The whole test was a translation of a particularly long and complicated text. My father, for whom languages do not come easily, was resigned to fail. That is, until he realized that the
text was actually from the Gospel of John, Chapter 3, verses 16-21, which he knew by heart. Excitedly, he copied the verses down from memory and was first to turn in his test, to a frowning professor suspecting foul play.

I felt the same way listening to the Apostles Creed in Spanish and the Lord's Prayer after that. At first, the chanting worshipers might as well have been speaking Greek for all that I could understand, their musical voices rolling over me in a wave. And then I caught onto the rhythm and understood - not because I could understand, but because I too had been schooled in some of the commonalities of Christianity. Even though we didn't recite this on a weekly basis in my father's church, it was comforting. Even if I couldn't speak the language, at least I was in on the secret.

There is a Catholic tradition that I actually like very much, and wish that Baptists would be more open to it. At a point in every Mass, everyone turns to one another to "Pass the Peace." This traditionally means a kiss, but usually is accomplished today with a handshake and a whispered, "Peace be with you." In my father's church, we did pause in the service to offer welcome to one another, but without such strange and mysterious sounding language. We simply shook hands and drawled, "Good to see you this morning, glad you could make it," which really could be said anywhere - in a business meeting. There is far too much business meeting in Baptist worship. "Peace be with you" seems to have greater spiritual meaning. I wish it was something we all said to one another, Christians and non-Christians. The phrase is originally taken from the Hebrew greeting of the Ancient World – Shalom. Peace be with you. Be whole. Be well with God and with the World.

I knew it would be coming, but because of the language barrier I wasn't sure exactly when. And I was nervous, because I realized that I didn't know what to say. At some point I had known the Spanish word for peace (it's paz), but in a flush of panic, I couldn't remember if the
word I was thinking of was really the Latin (pax) or the Italian (pace). The moment came, but I didn't realize it until one of my standing Hispanic neighbors turned toward me, a big smile on his face. I thought that I would listen to what he said and then simply repeat it, but he didn't say anything at all. Maybe he was waiting for me to speak, or maybe he didn't know what language to use with a young white kid who had been whispering in English throughout the Mass. There was an awkward moment while I tried instead to listen to whatever Julie was saying to someone else, but I couldn't catch it. So we just smiled awkwardly and shook hands.

One of the ushers was making his way through the standing crowd in the back, happily exchanging peace with everyone he met. He shook my hand vigorously and whispered, "La Paz de Christos esté con usted." This was more than I was prepared for, so I tried to cover by mumbling and making my smile bigger. I doubt he was fooled, but he was happy to nod and move on. Finally, another nearby man - taller than myself and with a thick black beard - turned to Julie. To her, he said, "La Paz de Dios." Paz, I thought, Of course! I can manage a Paz. I steeled myself as Julie whispered back. Then he turned to me. God be with you," he said, in accented English.

"Um, you too," I said, so prepared for Spanish that I stumbled over my English. Why Spanish to Julie, and English to me? For a brief, confused moment, I thought that perhaps he could tell that I wasn't Catholic, before it occurred to me that speaking in Spanish had nothing to do with Catholicism. I thought maybe that I should have been offended (I might have spoken Spanish, after all), but I wasn't. He didn't speak English to single me out or to make me feel unwelcome, but rather as a courtesy. Behind his beard, his eyes were sharp, and I had no doubt that he had appraised our situation in a glance. Hispanic Girl takes White Boyfriend to Church. He couldn't have known that it was actually me who had done the bringing, but he was close enough.
Not being able to understand much of the service, I had been quietly observing him. He stood attentively, listening carefully when the priest spoke. When he crossed himself, he meant it. And when the time came for those in the pews to pull out the kneeling cushion, he was alone among those of us in the back to bend both knees to the hard tiled floor.

I have at times felt a sense of superiority in Catholic churches. There is a passage from the Bible that almost always comes to mind - from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. He is answering a specific question that has been raised - whether or not it is acceptable for Christians to eat food that has been sacrificed to pagan gods. His answer is, essentially, that food is food, and strong Christians are free from that sort of quibbling. Paul argues that we are bound by Love and not by Law. Still, he also points out that if you are a stronger Christian, it's bad manners to go around making a lot of people upset by eating sacrificed food in front of them. My point is this: sometimes while visiting Catholic churches with their rituals, traditions, and insistence that an exact moral code must be followed in order for one to be a Christian, I am tempted to see myself as the Strong Christian who needs to indulge his weaker brothers. They can have their candles and their statues and their exclusionary Eucharist, but I know just how unnecessary they are. I think that there is some truth to this - I wouldn't be a Baptist otherwise. But watching my new friend drop to both knees in earnest prayer, I realized that my sense of superiority over such trivial things was not just pointless - it was counterproductive, and even unchristian. It was just another kind of exclusion.

There was something disingenuous about our visit from the beginning. We were tourists, visiting the local iglesia. Even though it was true that we were actually looking for a church to call home, and even though it was also true that I actually wanted to go to Mass in order to be fair, we never had any intention of making this church our home. Julie came because she wanted
to practice her Spanish, and I only insisted that we go in the first place because I didn't want to feel like a jerk. This was an experiment from the beginning, and looking back now, I'm not sure exactly what it was we were hoping to discover.

I knew going in that I was never going to become a Catholic. Julie knew it too. This was the real reason that I had been banned from Mass in the first place. I did want to be fair, and I did want to learn more about Julie and Julie's spirituality - my motives were not wholly impure. But I approached Catholicism as a Baptist approaches everything - I went to Mass so I could have something to argue about. I went as a Baptist, and not with an open mind, so that each time we went I felt more confirmed in being a Baptist, not more open to Catholicism. I wanted to Debate - in the highest, Platonic sense of the term, sure - but like in any debate my ultimate goal was not to understand my opponent. It was to understand myself. That might be a noble aim, but it wasn't a fair one for St. Anthony's. And it certainly was just as unfair to Julie as her "it isn't Catholic" stance was to me.

Not only had we come to St. Anthony's under false pretenses, our entire search for a church had been made under false pretenses. Baptists believe, or claim to believe, that motive matters more than form. Faith matters more than practice. It is not enough, we say, to go to church in order to be a Christian - it has to touch your heart. This, essentially, is my fundamental disagreement with Catholicism. Not that Catholics aren't faithful, but that the rituals, traditions - the trappings of religion - often take the place of religion itself. Yet here I was, bringing Julie to church with me for the sake of form. I so wanted to share something deep and meaningful that it was getting in the way of sharing something deep and meaningful. A desire for future family cohesion, as good a desire as that may be, isn't enough of a reason to go to church if it means compromising who we are. Maybe, paradoxically, our family would be more cohesive if we recognized and embraced our differences.
Julie and I may never look at spirituality or God in the same way, but even though we came for all the wrong reasons, our experience at St. Anthony's was a real one. For all my bluster about statues, I was touched; I experienced real worship. We found something there that neither of us was really looking for. Watching the kneeling man's real, honest devotion, I felt suddenly closer to Julie. I was standing slightly behind her and apart - both of us leaning against a brick column. I leaned over and lightly kissed the back of her head. I stuck my hands in the pockets on the front of her coat, pulling her closer. I had wanted us to find a church because I didn't want our religious differences to come between us. But standing behind her with my hands in her pockets, both of us happily listening to the end of the service in a language we didn't really understand, I knew that they wouldn't.

There is another passage from 1 Corinthians that I am fond of. In this instance, some of Paul's followers are complaining that another early Christian missionary, Apollos, has started teaching in the city. He writes: "For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not mere men? What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Peter or the world or life or death or the present or the future - all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God," (from 1 Corinthians 3). What, after all, was Baptist? And what was Catholic? Julie and I are different, but we aren't so different. We may never find a church that we can call home together: certainly not by trying to force it. We may disagree; we may run into practical complications when we have children. But I realized in St. Anthony's that God, and our love, transcends all practical considerations. Julie will always be a Catholic as I will always be a Baptist, but we will both be of Christ, and Christ is of God. That's more than enough for me.
On Miracles

WHT! who makes much of a miracle?
As to me, I know of nothing else but miracles.
-- Walt Whitman
THE FOURTH DREAM

When my father dies, he will be wearing a tan colored overcoat.

He knows this, because he saw it in a dream.
"Wow, that's a pretty scary dream, Dad."

"It's just a dream, son."

"Yeah, right. I think it's more than that."

"And you think that this dream will come true?"

"I'm not 100% sure.

I think the circumstances that might have made it come true have already passed."

"And in our dream, something really weird happened with it."

"A few years ago, I bought a new overcoat."

"I didn't realize until I had taken it home and tried it on. But it was the exact same tan overcoat from my dream."
"Wait, let's back up for a second."

"Quo, it's your move."

"When my father was a junior or a senior in high school, he had a series of nightmares that he remembers with clarity to this day.

He remembers them because he is convinced that three of the four have come exactly true.

Well, mostly true. I'm in the dream, but (2020) I'm still alive."

"Good point. Mostly true then."

"I just thought they were bad dreams. I didn't think that God was speaking to me."

"They didn't really seem that important."

"Beam me up, Lord."
My Dad grew up in Portsmouth, Virginia, about a 4 hour drive across the middle of the state from where he is now.

He planned to go to law school and then, with the help of my grandfather's union connections, become a politician.

He went to a Baptist church regularly with his family. He was a Baptist Christian, but didn't give it much thought beyond that.

He certainly wasn't planning on becoming a minister.
When he was about 17, he went with his church youth group to a VA Baptist Retreat called Eagle Eyrie.

I actually only went because of a girl. But she wasn’t as impressed with me as I’d hoped. So I ended up standing most of the events to play D-ball.

Eventually an adult showed up to force him to go to services.

Ben, age 27

Embarrassing shorts.

Nerdy socks

Zuru basketball skill.

Okay, fellow. Enough fun - it’s time for sleep.

Died, age 17

Swim now.
Over the week, he found himself surprised by how much he was moved by the services each night. Just before heading home, he approached the main speaker – a man named Ed Seibough – to tell him so.
THE FIRST DREAM

My father and a date were on their way to an away football game - the first of the season.
I know it sounds incredible when you stack them next together like this, but I had completely forgotten about the dream.

We were on our way to Great Bend, when a car came barreling around the corner toward us.

"I swerved on the road."

"It wasn’t until I heard the sound of the tires on gravel that the dream came rushing back to me."

"Because I remembered the dream, I cut my wheels the other direction. We were turned up a bit, but otherwise fine."

The car went around us, and we went on our way.
I didn't know about my Dad's dreams until just a few years ago.

It's not something he talks about.

When I did learn about them, I was astounded.

Though he is a Baptist Minister and certainly believes in the miracles of the Bible, he is not the kind of person that seems to expect them.

In all my years of attending his church, I have never seen him attempt a public faith healing or speaking in tongues, or anything that we typically associate with those who actively believe in Miracles.

He is suspicious of—

—NOT JUST SUPERSTITION, I DISAGREE—

—TV Preachers who are profiting off of their supposed supernatural connection to God.
I believe that God operates within the laws of his universe. What we might call supernatural events can happen, but they are extremely rare.

I know our town is strange.

Can I get a Bible coming with extra Holy Ghost?

"God is not for sale."
I did not because Dad never spoke about TV-Preacher Style Miracles doesn't mean that I didn't grow up adjacent to that kind of environment.

On the Religious Spectrum, Dad would place himself as a moderate-conservative.

Just in my given congregation, there are always those more conservative than the pastor.

I grew up hearing stories, beyond not the Bible stories...

- of tremendous healings and angelic in domains innermost

- of miracles

Even though I wanted to, I never really believed in them.

Even though our Sunday School teachers used Thomas as a negative example, I always greatly sympathized.

Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe it.

- But I'll believe it when I see it.

- I still have the nail... I know that what seems rational is not always what is true.
My father is climbing Old Jug Mountain with two of his friends.

Perhaps recklessly, they have decided to deviate from the trail and to climb up the mountain’s rocky face.

THE SECOND DREAM
Just like with the first dream, my father had forgotten the one by the time it came true.

My two best friends, Erik and Larry, didn’t have dates for the prom. Since my girlfriend at the time was a fundamentalist who didn’t believe in dancing anyway, the three of us decided to hire Old Rag instead.

Now, Old Rag can be a tough mug, but it isn’t really dangerous. If you take the tracks.

So naturally we thought it would be more fun to go straight up the front.

As soon as I saw the flower — I knew Erik was going to fall. It was so distinct, alone among the rocks.

Just as he started to slip, I rushed up behind him to steady him. We laughed about it.

But I was sure we took the tear back down.
For all that, my Dad actually considers himself generally skeptical.

I have read about normal people who have experienced the unexplainable, particularly in exotic places.

I find those stories – exciting reading, crazy things like that – hard to believe except that they were witnessed by authorities that I would normally find to be perfectly rational.

What he has done is have dreams that have accurately predicted the future. Dreams – he believes – were sent to him as warnings from God.

Like him, I am both a believer in God and a skeptic of the paranormal. What, then, am I to make of my father’s dreams?

He has never used those dreams as a tool of Evangelism. To my knowledge, he has never shared them publicly at all.

Though he is perfectly willing to share when I ask, I haven’t heard about the dreams from my mother.

Because he has no clear ulterior motive, I am forced to choose: either he is telling the truth, or he is a liar, or he is delusional.
I am reminded of a quote from one of my favorite books growing up - *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis.

At this point, Peter and Susan believe that something is wrong with their younger sister Lucy because she is insisting that she just visited a magical world inside a wardrobe and won't admit that she was just pretending. They have come to their caretaker - The Professor - for help.

Why don't they think logically at these schools?

There are only three possibilities. Either your sister is telling lies, or she is mad, or she is telling the truth. You know she doesn't tell lies and it is obvious that she is not mad.

For the moment then and unless any further evidence turns up, we must assume that she is telling the truth.

Since my father is nothing more than a liar and a cheat, it is that logic or telling the truth.
THE THIRD DREAM

Keep in mind that when I had the dreams, they had nothing to do with my reality at all.

They all came to me 6 months to a year before they came true.

How many dreams from 6 months ago do you remember?

It wasn’t until just before or even right as they were happening that the dream would hit me.

WHUMP WHUMP WHUMP

"There was always a trailer - some same dream that brought it back to me."

Stop the car, now."
For a third time, my father saved his life and the lives of others by acting on information from a dream he’d had, some six months before.

He is aware of how this sounds.

When you put it all together, it makes it sound like I am either a dummy or a crazy person.

But these kinds of events - supernatural events - have only happened to me 4 or 5 times. If you count all the dreams separately.

I don’t really focus on it.

I have no reason to believe that something like this will happen for 50 years, or ever again.

I don’t rely on these things - I can’t see the future or anything like that.
Mr. Lewis's logic is convincing, but it might be a bit simplistic.

Let's go to the whiteboard.

What Lewis didn't mention is that a person can believe what they say, not be "mad" exactly, yet still be mistaken.

People aren't bad for believing the world was flat - they were just wrong.

Reconstructing a memory is like re-assembling that desk you bought in college from IKEA. Each time you move, you lose a few more pieces.

Memory can be a tricky thing. Because it is not an exact copy of events but an re-interpretation of old memory data, we tend to adapt memory from a present-tense standpoint.

It's not that our memories are wrong. They have just been rewritten from our current point of view.

As any good historian will tell you, history, personal or otherwise, is as much about the concerns of the moment as it is the concerns of the past.
I could, perhaps, explain away my Father's dreams this way. But even if I do, there are unanswered questions that remain.

I have no reason to believe that something like this will happen for 80 years, or ever again.

Why these four dreams and not any others? If that is just the shape his imagination takes, why doesn't it happen all the time?

You could argue that he reconstructed the memory of the dreams after the traumatic events took place—but does that really remove the mystery?

What did tell him to set, if not his dreams?

- How is that not miraculous?

Even if it were 'only' his subconscious, picking up on small details and making imaginative sense of it all after the fact—
My father's response to this is understanding, but absolute:

I can see how you could explain them away if they didn't happen to you.

If you are lucky enough to experience the unexplainable — a miracle if you want — you recognize it.

There is no rational explanation. You just know.
There is one event in my father's life, separate from the
dreams, that I find even more difficult to reconcile.

When he arrived, he found that
their contact had been flown out
because of an injury, and the young
Tanzanian pastors they were meant
to train were more keen on having
these American pastors do
Evangelical Preaching (also known
as Proselytizing).

To make matters worse, he
developed laryngitis almost as
soon as he landed.

In 1955, the Virginia Baptist Mission Board
partnered with Christians from Tanzania.

As part of the exchange, my father
went with a team of pastors to
help train aspiring Tanzanian
clergymen.

JOIN TEAM JESUS!

I think it's generally a
bad idea to preach at
people especially if they
aren't Christians. Still, I
was there to help, so I
said okay.
Way did you bring me here?

"On the first day that I was to preach, I was arguing with God in my head, as I do so often. He had brought me all this way, but I wasn't doing what I had planned—and now I couldn't even speak?"

It occurred to him, just minutes before he began, that he only really had to speak loud enough for the interpreter to hear him—he couldn't speak Swedish anyway.

"It was like someone had turned a spotlight on me—like I was plunged into an electric current."

"It was just at this moment of realization that the inspiration occurred."

"Everything disappeared but that light."

"I felt, rather than heard, God telling me not to be discouraged. It lasted just a moment—"

"I found myself standing on the wooden platform in the little church."

"Then the light was out."

No one else seemed to hear or understand anything.
There were several young men in the back of the church who obviously wanted nothing to do with what was going on.

It was clear, if only from their posture, that they were intent on disrupting the service.

I didn't know how, but suddenly I knew what they were up to. I knew that they were going to intimidate people physically—they were going to shout and throw things.

But not only that—he knew their names, their history, their crimes.

I don't remember how—I forget almost as soon as it was over—but at that moment I could have told you their whole life stories.

And he told them.

And he called them by name.

He told them that God knew who they were and what they were trying to do, but that He would forgive them if they asked for it.

One of the men was a thief.

When my father began to list the man's crimes, one by one, he turned and ran for the door.

One of the others left quietly, and the last started to cry.

He would eventually become a Christian, along with many of the others who had come out of captivity.
"I want to be clear, this was a strange situation for me. I didn't know how it happened, any more than they did."

"But whatever has just happened, it wasn't my doing."

"It was God's."
I find that I can't explain this away.

There is nothing about my father that suggests that he is a man who has seen visions.

He is short and stout, bald with glasses - polite but quick to laugh.

Though he had to learn to fake it, he's actually quite shy outside the family. I think he'd rather have all of us at home, watching a movie together than do just about anything else.

Growing up, he was the kind of Dad that would play with us. As adults, we can talk about movies or music or books for hours.

He loves mysteries, fantasy and science fiction, but hates tragedy.

There is nothing he does in excess except perhaps to check his watch.

In other words, he is normal - no more or less interesting than the next person unless you happen to be his son.
So - I am not sure what to think.

But I have felt a presence - a connection with the world and my fellow human beings that has been, at times, overwhelming.

I have never had a prophetic dream, never experienced the supernatural in a overt and physical way.

I have felt comfort when I have had no reason to expect it - confidence and certainty when I had none.

I have my doubts that my father's story is possible, but ultimately I must choose to believe that it is true.

At some point Faith is not about the absence of Doubt.

It is about hope.

I have faith in the possibility of miracles because I know that what seems supernatural will not always be. And because something that is natural is not any less miraculous for being so.

Mostly, I have to believe that my father is telling the truth, because I believe in him.

The End.
THE MAGICIAN'S SON

My father was an amateur magician. He bought ready-made tricks at magic shops, studied books on card tricks, coin tricks, and number games, and practiced sleight of hand for hours in front of the mirror. He kept all the tools of his trade stored together in a trunk that he’d drag out at birthday parties and special occasions to delight my siblings and me, along with the kids in our Chesapeake, Virginia neighborhood.

The trunk was black with silver fastenings and trim. It seemed big to me then, when I was about ten years old - big enough that I could have slept comfortably inside. At ten, anything bigger than you are, which is to say everything, is instantly mythic: part of a different, grown-up world beyond your experience. My father, shorter than any of us now, at just under 5’7,’’ could have been the size of a Philistine giant - big is big.

The trunk was kept in my parent’s walk-in closet. When my parents were busy, I’d go in their closet and shut the door behind me, transforming the coats and shirts and ties into bejeweled stalactites and stalagmites. I’d push away the coats that hung over the trunk, unearth it from beneath a mound of shoes and old boxes of books, fallen hangers. Then, in the half-light coming from under the door, I’d sit and think about all the wondrous things that might, at that very moment, be hiding inside.

I don’t recall ever opening the trunk. Nor do I remember ever even being tempted, though that seems strange now. What little boy wouldn’t want to peek, especially when he had been expressly forbidden? I must have considered it. I used to play with the fastenings, clicking them open and snapping them shut. The central one looked like the covering to a giant keyhole,
so that when I imagined my father opening up the trunk, I saw him pulling out a massive iron key - the kind you could only wear on a thick leather cord around your neck. But the trunk wasn’t really locked. I could have looked, and gotten away with it.

On some level though, I already knew what was in there. I didn’t need to look. I had seen him reach into its depths to pull out magic hats, trick wands, tubes covered in Chinese dragons that disappeared in flashes of smoke. He’d take out each trick and lay it across a card table covered in black felt. And each time he’d say, “Remember that what you are about to see is only an illusion. I have no magic powers.” Then he’d prove himself wrong. To those of us gathered there, in awe of how he always knew our card or how he could pass coins through our very flesh and bone, the trunk was more than just a place to store his tricks. To us, that trunk was impossibly bottomless, as if it wasn’t a container at all, but a portal to other worlds.

It was the only trunk we owned, since we were do-it-yourself suitcase people. We made do with duffel bags and pillow cases, book-bags drafted for clothes and toothbrush duty. There was something inherently mystical about having a trunk in the house. It seemed like a relic of another age. I would sit in that dark closet and ponder what exotic locations it had seen, what adventures my father must have gone on in order to win it. Maybe he had challenged its previous owner to a magician’s duel. Or maybe he had discovered it, hidden deep in bottomless caves underneath the Himalayan mountains. Some days, I imagined that it was an artifact of an ancient alien civilization - its mysterious origin not on Earth at all.

Had I opened it, I knew I would have found the assorted tricks tossed carelessly inside like so much discarded junk - with tags or stamps showing they were bought from places with names like Ye Olde Magick Shoppe. But even knowing the truth, actually opening the trunk would have been the death of the dream of what I might find. To me at that moment, lying on my back in Spiderman pajamas, flipping the silver fastenings of the trunk with my toes, the dream of
what could be was just as real as the dream of what was. Only opening the trunk could have
dispelled the one and solidified the other. Instead of imagining carefully constructed
cardboard tubes or plastic wands that fell apart when you grabbed them in the middle, I imagined
that on the day that I did see the inside, smoke would rise, lightning would flash, a staircase
would open inside the trunk, and my father would take my hand to shepherd me down into the
mystery.

I should point out that stage magic is not a common hobby among Southern Baptist
Ministers. There are many ultra-conservative Baptists who take any mention of magic to mean,
quite literally, black magic - a tool of the Devil. These are the people who would burn Harry
Potter books believing that they encourage children to practice real witchcraft, and to summon
demons and consort with Satan.

To provide some context: For a few years when my brother and I were in high school, my
mother led a weekly bible study for a few of my brother’s friends and me. Some of them went to
our church, some of them went to another church, some didn’t go to church at all. Every Sunday
evening we’d meet around the dining room table and talk about the Bible and about our lives for
an hour. Then we’d go play Dungeons and Dragons. My brother and I would spend hours
constructing adventures ahead of time, leading our friends through Beowulf-like quests for blood
and treasure that always had the fates of kingdoms hanging in the balance.

To my parents, there was nothing incongruous about this - they did not see Dungeons and
Dragons as fundamentally different from Monopoly or Uno or any other game that might make
an appearance on family game night. If anything, we were more encouraged in this arena because
it required so much of our imagination. My father had spent countless hours with us when we
were younger, playing a similar but simplified board game called HeroQuest. If we didn’t tell
anyone outside of that particular circle of friends, it was because we were afraid of being labeled
as nerds, not as secret practitioners of the Occult.

But this is exactly what happened to our friend David. He attended a more conservative
Baptist church down the road from ours. Never mind the hour of bible study, when his youth
minister found out that he was flirting with demonic forces by drinking way too much Mountain
Dew and pretending to kill imaginary monsters, he called him out in a public prayer meeting as a
“special concern.” My brother claims that some of the other youth in that church spread rumors
about us in school: that we were worshipping the devil. I don’t remember any of that, but I was
in a different grade. I do remember that my father made a phone call to David’s youth minister
demanding, on biblical grounds, just as public an apology. I don’t think David ever got it, but the
harassment stopped and he kept meeting with us on Sunday nights.

It has always shocked me just how unimaginative conservative Christians can be. It has
shocked me because they profess such strong belief in the intangible. Yet they often mistrust or
misunderstand whimsy. Every Halloween, for instance, my church would host an alternative
costume contest, with prizes going to the most authentic looking Bible characters. Thankfully,
my siblings and I were never required to attend. My father would always make sure to come
home early so he could change into his Devil costume and pass out ungodly amounts of candy.

Once, my father performed his magic for a children’s daycare class in the church, but he
got in trouble for it. Some of the more conservative members approached him, claiming that any
magic was a sin - and pointing to the Bible to prove it. My father tried to explain that there was a
difference between what he was doing and the various passages warning against those who claim
to have a real supernatural ability to curse or to consult with the dead. But they were hard to
reason with. In the end, he relented, and never performed his magic in church again. It was
frustrating, and sad that these well-meaning people could be so narrow-minded, but he had learned to pick his battles.

The first church I can remember attending was Elizabeth River Baptist, straddling the line between Chesapeake and Virginia Beach, VA. There was an older youth there named Bo who might have been, to my nine-year-old self, the coolest kid that had ever graced the halls of a Baptist institution. He was the kind of teen that always seemed to be in some kind of trouble, but who managed to take it all in stride, with a smile on his face. He was born to be a troublemaker, but that didn’t stop him from being a genuinely nice person. When you are nine, teenagers occupy what seems to be a wonderful in between space - they are capable of doing what you cannot, and yet remain childlike. They straddle two worlds, heroic child explorers into adult kingdoms. And Bo, dangerous and cool, always had a friendly word for me.

Once, after Sunday School but before the 11:00 worship service began, he pulled my brother and me aside to show us a magic trick. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a paper clip, holding it carefully between his thumb and index finger. Winking, he thrust the paper clip directly toward a power outlet. Brian’s eyes widened sharply, our mother’s voice no doubt ringing in his ears: metal + electricity = DANGER. Just when Bo should have been electrocuted the paper clip disappeared into thin air.

“But, where did it go?” I said, sticking my eye to the slots of the socket.

“It disappeared,” Bo said. “It’s magic.”

“Wow,” my brother said.

“No way.” I said.

He pulled out another paper clip from his pocket and made it disappear up Brian’s nose. Another went into my ear. We applauded as he moved on to show his trick to other kids.
We were still talking about the Paper Clip Miracle we had just witnessed as we walked into the sanctuary, plopping down into the front row next to our friend Kevin. The service had yet to start, and people were still milling around. We were telling Kevin about Bo’s trick, and pointing to where he was amazing other members of the congregation a few rows over. As we watched, one of the deacons in the church, Mr. Robinson, suddenly reached out and grabbed Bo’s arm. He forcibly pulled down Bo’s sleeve to reveal the secret of the trick: a series of rubber bands that snatched the paper clip back into his sleeve so fast that it seemed to disappear. Bo tried to wrench his arm free, but Mr. Robinson held it up proudly like a trophy. I’ll never forget that moment: the look of complete helplessness on Bo’s face, or the sadistic triumph on Mr. Robinson’s.

One of the commonly cited New Testament passages dealing directly with “magic” is a short scene in Acts, in which Peter and John deal with a magician known as Simon the Sorcerer. Here’s the simplified version: In the very early days of the church, Philip traveled to Samaria to spread the faith. There he met and converted (along with many others) a man named Simon who had previously been known as The Great One for his supposed magic powers. After hearing of Philip’s success, Peter and John went to Samaria to see how things were going. While there, Simon was impressed with their authority and power to do miracles. And he wanted that power for himself. So, he asked them if he could buy it. They told him to take his money and shove it (my Bible says: “Peter answered: ‘May your money perish with you!’”). Essentially, you can’t buy what God gives.

Most people seem to interpret this passage as evidence of the triumph of Miracle over Magic. In other words, God carries the biggest stick in the fight of supernatural supremacy. Simon the Sorcerer can’t do miracles as well as the Apostles can. But this strikes me as a
misreading. Or rather, it focuses on the least important part of the story. Peter is saying that God, and the wisdom and authority that faith can bring, are not things that can be bought and sold.

The truth of the story doesn’t have anything to do with either the miracles or the magic. I’m not saying there were no miracles, and I’m not saying there were. I’m saying that it doesn’t matter: the point is that neither God nor the Apostles’ credibility was for sale. In fact, the real miracle, whatever else may have happened, is that two out-of-work fishermen from Galilee weren’t willing to sell-out. With the money, they could have hired themselves a camel so they wouldn’t have to walk all the way back to Jerusalem. Or, they could have fed the poor, the widows, and the cripples that they were always going on and on about. But sometimes principle is more important than practice.

One of my favorite Bible stories growing up operates similarly. Actually, I should say that it was one of my favorite New Testament stories. The blood and guts of the Old Testament ensured that it was far and away my favorite testament until I was at least 15. But my favorite New Testament story was Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand (not to be confused with the feeding of the four thousand - an almost identical but separate event). I think this is because the version that is usually told is the one from the Gospel of John, which involves the generosity of a little boy. Having been a little boy myself the first time I heard the story, sitting quietly in my little boy Sunday best (clip-on tie, gray slacks, and gray vest - like a miniature banker) and listening attentively as a grandmotherly Sunday School teacher droned on, I naturally identified. Like any good PK (Pastor’s Kid), I saw myself as the hero in the lesson.

At the time, I didn’t realize that John is actually the only version with the boy, though the story is one of the few that finds its way into all four gospels. In the other versions, the generosity is all God’s.
The story goes like this: Jesus is boating across the Sea of Galilee to get some alone time away from all the crowds that won’t stop hounding him for healing. But when he gets to the other side, the crowds are there too, so he gives in and speaks to them and heal their sick. It gets late and, this being the 1st Century in an almost completely rural area, there’s really nowhere for these people to stop in and get a snack. The disciples come to Jesus and ask him to send everyone away so they might have time to walk to a nearby village.

Instead, Jesus tells the disciples that feeding the people is their responsibility. Naturally, the disciples are surprised. As a kid, I always thought they must have been stingy, but I think I would have been surprised too if I were unexpectedly asked to pay for food for some five thousand people. The disciples complain, saying, “But that would take eight months of a man’s wages!” Jesus only asks them what they’ve got - which turns out to be the little boy (the only person out of five thousand to have had the forethought to bring lunch) who is willing to share his five loaves of bread and two fish.

Then, the miracle. In a nice bit of foreshadowing, Jesus breaks the bread and has the disciples start passing it out. Then he breaks the fish as well, which seems kind of disgusting. The crowd eats their fill, leaving twelve baskets full of leftovers.

In Sunday School, the lesson was clear: be like the little boy. If you give what you have, God will do great things with it. The miracle was such a given to me then - so obviously factual - that I didn’t really think much about it. It was the boy that was the important part of the story. Outside of children’s Sunday School, however, the interpretation usually revolves more around the miracle itself. Conventional church wisdom seems to be that this is Jesus showing what he can do - proving that he is who he says he is.

Recently though, I heard another interpretation, from my sister-in-law’s father, Rich Newman. The Newmans are a family of scientists. My sister-in-law is a neuroscientist, and her
father invents new medical equipment for hospitals. Our families are so opposite as to end up much the same. The Wilkins’s are all academics too (both amateur and professional), but writers, musicians, artists and historians. We could get together to start a liberal arts college. Like us, the Newmans are churchgoing protestant Christians, though Presbyterian rather than Baptist.

Rich’s science-brain will not allow him to accept that there was an actual breaking of Natural Law that allowed Jesus to divinely multiply the bread and fish. In his view: why would God establish the laws of the universe if he was just going to show up one day and undo them all in a single stroke? Even so, Rich doesn’t deny that there was a miracle. Instead of a miracle of supernatural replication however, it was a miracle of generosity. Somehow, Jesus convinced five thousand people to share their food with one another, so that there was more than enough to go around. Rich assumes that there would have been more people than just one (clearly intelligent) boy who would have thought to bring some provisions.

The miracle in this version, while seemingly more mundane, is no less powerful when you think about human nature. Even well-meaning people, people who had been smart enough to provide for their own families (with perhaps a little extra for the walk home), would not necessarily see it as their duty to feed complete strangers who hadn’t had that foresight. It might occur to me to bring a hungry friend or neighbor into my share, but certainly not that weird guy who’d been talking so loudly all day that I couldn’t hear a damn thing that Jesus was saying. There is nothing quite like a crowd to bring out the very worst in people. The miracle part from Rich’s point of view was that there was something about being in the presence of Jesus that allowed these people to become the best versions of themselves - better than they had ever been before, as good as they had always hoped they could be.

My father disagrees. While he doesn’t dislike Rich’s interpretation, he solidly affirms the conventional church viewpoint that the miracle was a supernatural event. There were five loaves
and bread and two fish, and then Jesus turned them into hundreds more. Even so, to my father
the point of the miracle is not so much that Jesus is proving his power over the laws of the
universe, but that he is showing these hungry people that God cares about them. He’s not
showing off, he’s making a point. God not only cares about them in some far off, pie-in-the-sky
kind of way, he cares about them right now, when they are hungry because they forgot to pack a
lunch for the day.

Rich believes that the numinous multiplication cannot possibly be true; my father
believes that it must be. But what I like about both versions of the story is that neither is really
about the factual or un-factual nature of the miracle. Each claims that it is so, but then moves on
to reveal the hidden lesson based on their interpretation of the text. Rich believes that the miracle
is one of overcoming our selfish natures - we are our higher, better selves when we are in the
presence of Christ. My father believes that the miracle teaches us about the caring nature of God.
I’m going to take both of their arguments a step further and say that actually the miracle doesn’t
matter at all, except in as much as it was the occasion for something wonderful to happen. It is
that wonder, the effect, that is really the point.

When a child watches a magic trick, when I watched my father perform them at my
birthday parties, I didn’t care whether or not there was a rational explanation. I didn’t care
whether it was trickery or actual magic that made my card leap to the top of the deck. I mostly
chose to believe in the magic, but in the end, what difference did it really make? The effect it had
on me - on all of us there - was quite real, and that was good enough.

I cannot know if Jesus turned a boy’s simple offering into enough food to feed thousands.
I personally believe that he could have if he so chose. But it is also my experience that when God
works, he works mostly without flash, in small ways. Whatever the facts though, something real,
something true, is recorded in that story. I know because I have felt it.
When I was twelve or so, I thought that I might follow in my father’s footsteps as a magician. He taught me a few basic card tricks, then bought me a book so I could practice on my own. He promised that if I stuck with it, I might one day get a look inside the black trunk. But magic is a tough discipline for a twelve-year-old. It takes a lot of patience to learn to do card tricks smoothly. Because the whole point is to make the trick look like it isn’t a trick at all, the risk of failure is very high. All it takes is one misstep, one moment when you have to pay attention to what you are doing, drawing your audience’s attention as well.

My hobby didn’t last long, though there is a part of me that still thinks I might start back up someday, as if I really have been a magician ever since, just non-practicing. I’ve set my top hat and wand aside, but whenever I can find the time, I’ll pick them up again.

A few years ago, just before my wife and I were married, I did get the chance to put my rusty skills into practice. We were visiting with my wife’s sister, Daniele, and her family in Rochester, New York. Daniele has three kids. Whenever we visit or whenever they come down to Virginia, I spend much of my time with the oldest, Maddie. At the time, she was seven - just old enough not to require as much of her parents’ attention when there were babies to mind. So I thought I’d be a good Almost-Uncle Ben and show her a magic trick.

“How about two tricks?” Maddie asked.

“Okay, two tricks,” I said.

I’m glad she hadn’t asked for anymore - I can only remember two tricks. These were the first two I had learned: one from my father, and one from the book he bought me. I remembered them because they were especially easy to do and because I used to spend hours in front of my mirror, performing them to sell-out crowds.
The trick I chose first, known only to me as “Sim Sala Bim” for the magic words that it uses, is not really a trick at all. It involves no sleight of hand, or misdirection. The only trick is Math, so it is well-suited to those who still have some trouble with addition and subtraction.

“Now I need your help,” I said. “The magic only works if you do exactly as I say.” I was trying to imitate my Father’s stage voice, at once grave and gentle, serious and teasing.

“Pick a card. Any card.”

After she picked, I dealt the cards into three piles. Maddie chose her pile, and I asked if her card was in it. She said it was so I placed that pile in between the other two. And that’s really the whole trick. By repeating this process three times, the card in question will work its way to the same position in the deck, every time. When I had finished, I locked eyes with my audience. Eye contact is very important.

“Now, tap the deck three times and repeat after me.”

“Why?” Maddie asked.

“Because you have to say the magic words, or it wouldn’t be a magic trick, would it?”

“Oh,” she said, unconvinced.

After she tapped the deck, I had her repeat “Sim Sala Bim” one word at a time. As I said each word, I flipped out one card per letter, so that at the end there were ten cards face down on the table. The next card would be hers. It had to be hers, mathematically speaking. But I doubted. Had I counted right? Was I about to ruin her childhood? I wondered if my father worried like this, just before the trick was done, but I couldn’t imagine it. It wasn’t that his tricks didn’t sometimes go wrong; he just never seemed too concerned. But then, as every book of magic will tell you - confidence is everything.

I flipped over the Queen of Spades.

“This is your card,” I said.
She stared at it for a minute, as if she expected it to transform in front of her eyes. Then she sighed: “No,” she said.

“Are you sure? Maybe you just forgot what card you picked.” I said, starting to panic. What would my father do in this situation?

“I’m sure,” she said.

For a moment, I thought about debating the quality of her memory, but you can’t win an argument with a seven year old. Instead, I tried a tactic my father would use when his tricks went awry.

“When you said the magic words, did you really believe that it would work? Magic only works when you believe strongly enough,” I said, hoping that the take-away message wasn’t going to be “when things go wrong it’s probably your fault.”

“But magic isn’t real,” she said, emphatically, as if I should know better. “It’s just stories.”

“What? There is too magic. Just watch,” I said. We did the trick again, and this time it worked brilliantly. So there, I thought. But even though she enjoyed the trick the second time around, she wasn’t convinced. We skipped the second one.

At seven, Maddie was already suspicious of the stories that adults told her. This struck me as a great crime, so I would try to tell her imaginative stories whenever I could, swearing that they were true: nothing elaborate, just small things to make the world seem more enchanted or mysterious. She had loved the X-Men movies, for example, so I hinted that she might have latent mutant powers, looking pointedly at her parents as if they were evidence that the Mutant X-Factor gene was already in her blood.
This kind of casual storytelling, hinting at the existence of a world just beyond this one, comes naturally to me. It is how my parents, especially my father, spoke to me when I was seven. I grew up half-expecting that I might open a wardrobe one day and step into the land of C.S. Lewis’s *Narnia*. I was convinced for years that I was actually a member of an alien race and that by the time I turned 13 I’d have to have my horns sawed off - a story my father told me to distract me from my worries about my first day of school.

Why is it that so many people feel that these stories are *lies*? When I learned that some of the myths my parents had told me were not strictly factual, I never felt that I had been cheated. Lies imply a maliciousness, or a selfish intent. A parent lies to weasel out of a promise they made, or to make an excuse for not being where they should have been. But if stories like Santa Claus or the existence of Magic are lies then they are lies of an entirely different character. At worst, I was sad to learn that the world was a little less interesting than I had thought, not because my parents had briefly made it more so.

The other point of view, that children should be disabused of their foolish notions as soon as possible, is completely foreign to me. It seems not only misguided, but actually *wrong*. Imagination is as natural to the human condition as breathing: to stunt its growth seems like a form of psychological abuse. Perhaps because I was raised this way, I am biased. But I wonder if those church members who criticized my father, good people on the whole, suffered not from cruelty or stupidity but from a simple lack of imagination. Somehow they were unable to see the difference between bringing joy and spreading evil, just because the two happened to both be called “Magic” in the English language.

Children should believe in magic, in Santa Claus, in the possibility that a boy might show up at their window chasing his shadow, or that rabbit holes can lead to strange and terrible places. The weight of the real world will crush their dreams all in its own time - why should we want to
do it early? Why should we want it to happen at all? What do they gain in trade besides a narrow and dark view of the world?

We are giving children practice in belief. If they believe in magic at a young age, they are likely to believe in important adult myths at an older age: that one person can make a difference in the world, that people can change for the better, that there is a kernel of good in the worst people, that there is ultimately cause to hope for the fate of the human race. The world that we experience is largely a matter of perception. If we believe it to be a hard, barren prison, we are fashioning chains for ourselves and for our children. If we believe there is a way out - there will be.

I once had a direct conversation about magic, real magic, with my father. I was just old enough that my doubts were beginning to overtake my belief. We were at our family’s cabin, built by my mother’s father in the middle of central Virginia. It sits above a little creek that feeds into the James River, in between tree-covered hills that could be called mountains if you are four feet tall and squinting a little. That area of the state always seemed to be facing a drought when we came to visit, but that spring had been a rainy one so that anywhere you walked on our 100 or so acres of property you could hear the gentle rushing music of the creek below.

My oldest cousin had been telling my siblings and me the story of the Jackalope: a hybrid creature that appeared as a jackrabbit with antlers or horns and razor sharp teeth. The creature had magic powers, could imitate the human voice, and could only be seen out of the corners of your eyes. He told us that a friend of his, a park ranger, had seen one nearby and warned him that it might be coming our way. Of course, we immediately took off in search of the creature, razor sharp teeth or not. One of us would watch ahead while the others tried to peer out of the corners of their eyes.
We wandered down the path to the creek, over the long stones shaped like sleeping dragons. We plunged into the cold, knee-high creek waters, slipping and slogging our way over moss covered rocks, watching just as carefully for wolf spiders and water moccasins as for Jackalopes. We trudged our way upstream to where the creek passes just below the cabin - listening all the while for the Jackalope’s call. We thought we heard it too, but it turned out only to be my Uncle Bobby, growling an echoing yawn after a late afternoon nap. We turned back when it started to get dark.

Later, after dinner and when the family was scattered playing card games or reading books or washing up, I approached my father. He had a book pressed up against his face, as if the closer he held his book the longer he could hold off the final moment when the sun would completely disappear. “Dad,” I said, “is there really such a thing as magic?”

He paused and set down his book. I remember that he looked at me directly, eye to eye. “Yes,” he said finally, “there is magic. But it is God’s magic.” I can’t remember now if he explained further, or simply let that sentence hang in the air against the quickly dimming light.

There are moments in our lives when we experience that which we cannot explain, moments of clarity where we feel somehow more solid, more connected to the world and the creatures in it. One does not have to attribute this to God, as my father has, but we have all felt this.

We see it everywhere in nature. No amount of geological understanding can in any way diminish the sheer presence of Niagara Falls, for example. One could know everything about how it formed, how many fish rush over its side to their deaths every year, how many tourists flock to it and how many knickknacks they spend their money on, and still, standing in the face of its thunder is a transcendent experience. It marks itself on the imagination.
But nature does not have to be grand to grab our attention beyond any reasonable sense. We can be drawn out of ourselves by an ant, struggling under the weight of a breadcrumb, or by the sudden brilliant flowering of a tree that we have passed everyday for years and never - *never* - once noticed. We take these moments for granted, because there are so many of them perhaps, but that doesn’t make us feel them less keenly. Why should a tiny ant, a pest, demand our sympathies? Why should a dogwood tree break our hearts? Either we imagine them to be more than they are or they *are* more than they are. But does it matter? Either way, we are irrationally and wonderfully affected.

We see it in humanity, too. We see it in Holocaust survivors or the victims of terrible abuse who somehow, against any normal sense of logic or fairness or justice, find it in themselves to forgive those that have wronged them. It is the kind of thing that we imagine could not happen if it were us, and yet we cannot deny that it does happen. Why? There are times when we too find mercy, as if by accident. We think we will never be forgiven by a friend, or a spouse, or a child that we have betrayed, but then we are.

One can study this, of course. One can identify the exact place in the brain this takes place. One could explain what evolutionary purposes this might serve. And one could be 100% factually accurate. I do not debate the point. But if this is chemical, a trick of the unconscious mind, it is no less powerful or mysterious a force.

As my father puts it, God’s presence saturates the world we live in, and it is that very presence that makes life worth living. It is in all good things: in the mundane as surely, and as importantly, as in the dramatic. I recognize it when I take long walks with my dog, or when I am transported by literature or music. I know it when a complete stranger puts his arm around my shoulders at a concert, or when my church congregation joins hands to belt out “Blest Be the Tie That Binds.”
God’s Magic, then, is a kind of grace - unasked for, irrational, wondrous, and all too fleeting. It is also intimately tied to the imagination. It is, perhaps, a trick of the imagination. It fools us into believing that our lives can be better than they are. But I do not think it is any less real for that.

When I asked my wife to become my wife, we both knew that the day was coming. We had been dating for two years, loved each other deeply, and had openly discussed our marriage as a probable future event. Still, when I did the asking, I tried to make it as much a surprise as I could. She’s a lot smarter than I am, so I’m pretty sure she knew it was coming, but she couldn’t know how it was coming.

I made plans, as casually as I could, to take a trip with her to the college town where we met, and secretly arranged with my sister to make preparations. While taking a stroll, I led her behind the Math building. I’ve never stepped foot inside the Math building, but there is a flat patch of grass and a few trees behind it, just before a steep drop off toward the road below. Because of the brush on the hill you can’t actually see this space from the road. It exists on its own, in between. I used to spend hours there, lying in the grass with my head crooked between the roots of the trees, reading or just daydreaming. I had never brought Julie there before.

As we emerged from under the branches that blocked the entrance, we found the picnic my sister had laid out under an open tent, with champagne and candles lit. Nervously, I pulled the ring out of the breadbasket where it had been concealed and dropped to one knee.

It was, perhaps, an unnecessary gesture - my wife is not someone who demands romance. She would have said yes even if I had sprung the question on her while we were sitting on her couch watching reality TV. But I wanted that moment to be special. I wanted it to stand out. Out of the raw mercury of reality, I wanted to conjure something solid - a tower of memory; a
signpost in the gray ether of the past. I wanted to return to this place and time when the future of our lives turned hard or bitter, as I knew it so easily could. With candles and a ring, I hoped for nothing less than time travel.

So when I say that magic is real, I don’t mean that childhood myths are real - but that they prepare us for the kind that are. As G.K. Chesteron put it: “Fairy tales do not tell children that dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children that the dragons can be killed.” This is what my father did for me. He can’t protect me from the dull dangers of the world, but he armed me against them. By working with trick magic out of a trunk, he didn’t teach me the truth of God’s Magic. He did something far better: he confirmed it.

I have not yet been let into the trunk. Without children begging him for tricks, my father hasn’t pulled it out in years. Still, I know that the time will come when he will whisper the Sim Sala Bim in my ear to break the seals, open the lid, and reveal the mystery tucked away for so long. He’ll tell me how to manipulate the cards, pull endless ribbons from my pocket, and coax out smoke from the dragon’s tube.

When I was an infant, my father took me in his arms and carried me outside, under the stars. Real magic may not need the smoke and mirrors of illusion, but it doesn't hurt to set the scene. We are rarely as present with the divine as when we are under a clear night sky: under the watchful and protective gaze of a million twinkling eyes. Once outside, he lifted me. In my mind I see him holding me at arms length, at a dangerous height, though I doubt now that that was the case. He lifted me, and he asked for God to bless me. If that isn’t magic, then I don’t know what is.
CURRICULUM VITAE

Benjamin G. Wilkins graduated from Gloucester High School, Gloucester, Virginia, in 2002. He received his Bachelor of Arts from the University of Virginia in 2006. He was employed as a librarian assistant at the VDOT Research Library, then as an intern at the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty for six months each. He was then employed as a graduate teaching assistant at George Mason University for four years, and with the completion of his thesis, received his Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from George Mason University in 2011.