

My Father's Self-Defenestration

Sam Lively

When I was little my father told me the story of the time he hurled himself from the window of a church bathroom. I always had trouble reconciling this event with everything I knew about him, my grandparents, and myself. How could a man who hated church that much make his own son undergo the same misery once a week? Growing up in Massachusetts in the 1970's, my father attended Sunday school with the regularity of a good Catholic; and much like myself, he hated it. I'm not sure why Catholics think that the most effective method of selling their religion to the next generation is to tack on extra hours of school. The promise of eternal damnation does the trick for most. But it didn't for my father or for me. Neither of us could stand church, and I liked knowing we felt strongly about the same thing. Nonetheless, I endured Mass and Sunday school for the same reason he did: because our parents told us to.

When I was griping about church for the millionth time, he assured me again that he felt the same way when he was my age. To prove it, he told me the story of his self-defenestration. "When I was your age — nine or ten I think — I excused myself to the bathroom, and I lifted the window in there, and I jumped out. I grabbed my bike and spent the rest of the day running around," he told me.

"What did Papa and Grandma do?" I asked, vicariously terrified for my nine-year-old father.

"Well they weren't thrilled, I'll tell you that," he trailed off ambiguously. "But the point is that I get it son, I..." He probably knew whatever punishments I could dream up were far more terrifying than what actually happened. But the damage was done.

Every boy's father is his hero, but now my dad was James Dean, Indiana Jones, and Luke Skywalker. He was the rebellious vagabond who leapt from his Catholic prison to freedom. To hell with the beating he might receive from my grandmother, he couldn't spend one more damn second in that church. The whole thing was bullshit and he could tell! Whatever his original intentions were in telling me his story were profoundly lost in the sheer coolness of it all. If he'd told the tale in the spirit of shared suffering and comradeship, he had instead forged a most powerful recurring daydream.

That following Sunday I sat cross-legged in a musty church among ten other children as Pastor Franklin told us about the story of Job. While he spoke, I dreamt. My eyes traversed each wall, examining the windows, and deciding which one would be easiest to slip through. It would be so easy. The tantalizing daylight shined through every one of my potential escape hatches. Our church was the focal point of Stowe, Vermont's quaint Main Street. Waterbury Center — the town over, where my family lived — only had protestant or otherwise "cultish Vermont churches," as my father called them. Thus, we landed in the Stowe Catholic Community Church. Today, it must have been so picturesque. I could see snow pouring down, making small piles on the wooden window pane. It looked sturdy, like a good jumping-off point.

"Sam? Mr. Lively, are you with us?" Pastor Franklin said, piercing my scheming. 'No, I'm casing the joint,' I wanted to say. Instead I apologized. "Sorry Pastor Franklin I was... I'm here."

“I’m glad. I know we’re late in the day here guys just stick with me for another moment and we’ll go for a snack break. Sam, would you remind me where I left off in the Old Testament story of Job?”

“Yes, uh God allowed Satan to take everything Job had to test his faith,” I said, nervously clawing together context clues.

“That’s more or less right. And Job, because he’s a loyal servant of God, and because he does not want to accuse God of wrongdoing, he does not curse him. What do you all think he did instead?”

When he was met with only silence and rumbling stomachs, the Pastor continued again. “Job curses the day he was born, instead of cursing God,” he said, looking at us expectantly. “Well judging by the look on all of your faces, you can all relate to what Job felt. Let’s break for a quick snack.”

When all the parents began to file in and pick up their children at the lesson’s end, I snuck to the bathroom before my father arrived. Locking the door behind me, I set about examining the closet-sized restroom. Most importantly, the room had one window about eight feet off the ground. It wasn’t very wide, but there was plenty of space to wriggle through if I cleared the glass properly. Below the window there was a cabinet with a circular mirror above a recently installed marble sink. I remember the man who installed it stumbling through one of our lessons. That was a good day because Pastor Franklin had to pause for ten minutes to show the man where he’d be working. I placed my palms on the rim of the sink and pushed down hard, testing the strength of the moorings. My forearms flexed when I did so, and I thought how much stronger I would look if I could just maintain that state permanently. Looking up again at the window, I suddenly realized two things. The first, was that the window was sealed. The second, was that it would take some serious upper-body strength to pull myself up to, and through the narrow portal. I wondered if my father was strong for his age when he was ten. Or at least, had he been stronger than I was?

“Sam?” my father was wrapping on the door. “Can we get out of here?”

That afternoon dad picked me up from the church in his black, manual Tacoma. It was my favorite of our cars. This was mostly because it guaranteed my place in the passenger’s seat, since it only fit two people. But I also loved watching my dad change the gears with the black leather stick. There’s nothing exciting about watching someone drive an automatic car. Watching my father accelerate from second, to third, to fourth, as a dense Vermont snow poured down around us made me feel like I was his sidekick in an action film.

“At snack today I told everyone about the time you jumped out the window of your church in Holyoke,” I exclaimed proudly. But he turned, and the easy smile I expected was in fact a look of surprise.

“Pal, you didn’t. Tell me you didn’t do that.”

“I did. Should I not have?”

“Well no,” he trailed off. “I really shouldn’t have told you.”

That hurt me and we sat there silently for a moment.

“Well all the other kids liked it and they liked you. They thought it was badass. They asked if you had any other cool stories like that.”

“Jesus Sam you cannot be telling stories like that to other kids. That story was for you. That story was for you because I wanted you to know that I didn’t like church stuff as much as you did. Dammit. Please don’t tell any more stories like that. I’m not mad but... it's just... not what you do.”

We rode on, our action movie ended. I couldn’t understand why he wasn’t proud of himself. I thought, ‘when I have a son, I’ll tell him all the stories I have like that one. I’ll tell him about all the crazy things I did when I was a kid.’

“Dad, were your parents really mad when they found out?”

“Yup.” He paused a moment. “Sam, I told you that story because I didn’t want you to feel like we were subjecting you to some kind of torture. Or that we were making you go through something that we hadn’t gone through ourselves.”

“I know.” He continued, “When I jumped out of that window it wasn’t because it was cool or I was cool or whatever. That day one of the priests wheeled in a big old TV, and showed us recordings of abortion surgeries. You know what that means right?”

I nodded slowly. I did.

“They were showing abortions to kids. I was older but there were kids in there who couldn’t have understood what they were watching. I got angry, I marched to the bathroom, and I got out of there. Okay? Nothing brave about that. Nothing got accomplished from that.”

I couldn’t stop thinking about my father’s story. I was preoccupied for the entire week. I knew why he had finally told me the full story. Yet again, he had accomplished the opposite of his goal. He’d made me angry, angsty, and even more proud of my principled father. He had radicalized me against his church, and any church.

I spent the week planning and anticipating a great feat in my father’s honor. When he dropped me off on Main Street, I stood on the sidewalk in front of the church. For a modest town, with little religion, it was tall and well-cared for. I marched straight through the great, white front doors. I made my way to the classroom and sat stoically. I had arrived early, even earlier than Pastor Franklin. I was fuming when he arrived.

“Hello Sam! You staying warm today?”

“Hi,” I responded curtly. If he thought it was rude he didn’t show it. He simply sat at the head of the class and began sorting his readings for the day. Once the rest of the class rolled in he cleared his throat to commence.

“Alright guys let’s settle in here. Today we’re going to learn a little about...” “I need to use the bathroom,” I interrupted loudly. Pastor Franklin was shocked by the interruption and stuttered through a reply. “Weren’t you... Weren’t you waiting when I got here? Why didn’t you go before class?”

“I did, I have to go again.” The other children were all facing me, smelling the challenge I was laying before Pastor Franklin. This wasn’t how you asked to use the bathroom. “Can I go?” His eyes narrowed, and we both knew how badly he wanted to say no. ‘Fuck him,’ I thought. ‘Fuck him and anyone who could do this to kids.’ Any one of the kids around me could have been my dad. What they were doing wasn’t right. For all I cared, Pastor Franklin was the

very man who had wheeled that TV in front of my father thirty years ago. They were all complicit. Pastor Franklin relented.

“Be quick please.”

In the bathroom, I executed my plan. From my pocket, I fished out the sharp rock I retrieved from my driveway earlier in the morning. I gripped the sink, trusting once again that the nails and moorings would hold true. Placing my left hand on top of the cabinet, and my right sneaker on the rim of the sink below it, I hoisted myself up. To the right of the sink was the window with which I was now eye-level. I smashed the rock into the window like a heroic caveman, and to my great horror, an alarm pierced the quiet church instantly. I knew I couldn't stop then, or I would have failed and I would be in a colossal amount of trouble without properly sending my message. So I smashed the window rapidly, over and over again. My hands were quickly bloodied, and tears clouded my eyes. I could hear somebody pounding on the bathroom door behind me, and I was keenly aware that time was running out. I had to move now. I leaped from the rim of the sink through the window frame. I felt the crunch and sting of glass on my ribcage, as I dragged my torso through the frame and outside in the winter air. The fall was higher than I had initially thought. Perishing the thought I kicked and squirmed, my fight or flight instincts enabled me to ignore the bits of glass finding their way through my shirt and jeans. My upper body seesawed forward, and I gave into the momentum. One more forward pulse of strength from my core and I was free. I somersaulted through the air once, landed hard on my back fifteen feet below, and cracked the back of my skull on the glass-covered pavement.

I remembered another story my father had told me while we were driving through his hometown to visit my grandmother. We were traversing a small freeway that runs through the heart of Holyoke, and he gestured towards an obscure clearing on the side of the road.

“See that? I used to sneak out of the back of my house and ride my bike through that clearing,” he explained. He gestured across the highway toward a row of houses on the opposite side of the clearing. “I had a girlfriend that lived right around there.”

What a childhood our parents must have had. They could sneak around, bike through their neighborhoods, meet up with their boyfriends or girlfriends. I couldn't do that. Would I have done that if I had their upbringing?

I awoke to Pastor Franklin's terrified face hovering above me. I tried to sit up, and he placed his palm on my chest to prevent me.

“Get off me!” I screamed, and a burst of pain erupted from the crown of my head.

“Sam do not move, do not sit up. Stay calm, and don't look down at your left arm.” I looked down at my arm. Pastor Franklin was pressing his overshirt onto it, obscuring the extent of the damage. But I could see blood absorbing into the white shirt, and I couldn't feel anything below the elbow. A blessing perhaps. I was crying then, and Pastor Franklin hushed me.

“There's help coming right now. You are going to be okay. You hear me?” I fell unconscious again.

I returned to consciousness briefly while we were in the ambulance. I was strapped into a gurney, my neck immobilized.

“Pastor Franklin?” I asked anxiously.

“Right here Sam, you’re going to be okay. We’re taking you to the hospital now, your parents are meeting us there.”

“I can’t see you.” I couldn’t turn my head on the gurney. He leaned over into my field of vision.

“I’m here, stay calm. You’re going to be okay. Right?” A voice from behind agreed with him. I fell asleep again.

In the hospital doctors stitched my arm, and told me I’d gotten a sizable concussion from the fall. No more Sunday school for quite a while. My mother and father arrived after I’d been treated. They hugged me, and kissed me, and screamed at me. My mother had figured out why I had thrown myself from a church window pretty quickly, so she was equally furious with my father. He waited until she’d left to go consult with Pastor Franklin to ask me, “What the hell were you thinking?”

“I don’t know...”

“I mean what were you thinking? Why would you do this?”

“I don’t know! Am I in trouble?”

“Yes! Later, yes. Just... be healthy again for now.”

He put his head in his hands and sat next to my hospital bed. “You can’t ever do this to us ever again alright?”

“You didn’t think I would do it did you?”

He looked up at me with a puzzled expression. “No. No of course I didn’t.” Then he paused.

“That’s why I did it,” I said.