



Hell In A Bucket

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I am hellbound. At least that's what I hear, with surprising regularity, often from the mouth of complete strangers. The opinions flow to me in the form of flame embossed business cards, placards and signboards, and even the Mad Dog 20/20 tinged ravings of pee-scented men on the buses and trains in my life.

Now I don't think I'm a bad person. I floss daily and change my underwear with roughly the same frequency, with the exception of those laundry days when my boxers are called up for double-duty, which I'm sure even happened to Jimmy Stewart from time to time.

I return stray shopping carts to their corral at the supermarket, hold open doors for the elderly, and am pretty sure that if I was stranded on a desert island with a stranger I could resist the urge to eat them for a day or two. I do live with my girlfriend, and we're not married, but unless her parents have somehow wrangled their way into being arbiters of my soul's final resting place, I think I'm safe on that one, as no one else seems to care.

All this raises the question: what have I done to invite the threats of damnation? What decision in my life seems to have marked me with an invisible sign that announces: "Proselytizers and transients, here's your man!"

As far as I can tell, the decision that spurred my hell-talk into motion was, ironically, the choice to attend a Catholic college. While most of my friends went to public schools, where they had the opportunity to lose entire semesters to hallucinogens and to try to make love to sorority girls, I chose to go to Notre Dame, where there was a 2,000 year old framework of belief and ritual in place to make sure nothing fun happened.

In hell terms, it should have been fail-safe. To facilitate the resistance of temptation, all dormitories were single-sex, and an hour was assigned, midnight on weekdays and 2 A.M. on weekends, after which you could be kicked out if your room wasn't clear of all members of the opposite gender. Also, there was a crucifix in every room on campus, and clergy in every dormitory, selected specifically for their ability to materialize at the exact moment when a student found himself alone with a member of the opposite sex.

The girl's dorms were staffed with fierce old ladies who had the ability to hear male voices through five feet of reinforced concrete, and could sense an erection like a bloodhound tracking down Cool Hand Luke. As a final, insidious line of defense, most of the girls at the Catholic school were, in actuality, Catholic. And not just "there's-a-Mary-in-my-name-somewhere-Catholic," but rather "I can name the twelve apostles and, dead as they are, they still stand a better chance of getting laid than you" Catholic.

As I grow older, I occasionally hear people repeat the laughable notion that Catholic girls are easy. In keeping with the topic of proper resting places for one's soul, I think it would be appropriate for those who believe this to be reincarnated as a condom in a Notre Dame student's wallet, so they could suffer, useless, for eternity, or at least four years.

Returning to the topic of hell and those that condemn me there, as I've said, Notre Dame would seem like a strange place for such treatment to start. But, holy rollers crave an audience like everyone else, and the football weekends provided a stage for all sorts of nuts and brimstone slingers. They would gather and march around the student entrance to the football stadium, carrying placards designed to make us consider the everlasting peril we were subjecting our souls to while still meeting the strict criteria of rhyming properly. "Live in sin, Hell is nigh, believe in Christ, or you'll fry." "Sex and drugs, rock and roll, don't forfeit, your immortal soul."

As I passed through this ring of fire to enter the stadium, I always stared down the protestors as they chanted their sinner songs and Jesus cheers. We were enemies, and it wasn't because I felt threatened by them, or resented their lack of respect for opposing viewpoints, or even objected to their terrible use of verse.

No, what bothered me was that the very assumptions they made about the circumstances that were condemning my soul to damnation, the reams of casual sex with multiple partners that they assumed made up the majority of each student's college experience, were the very things I was striving for and coming nowhere near realizing.

They were rubbing my face in it. I don't know what sins they imagined were on the docket of my soul, but I'm sure if they'd known the truth of my meager transgressions, they would have set down their placards, put a caring arm around my shoulder, and told me I needed to get out more.

Despite the fertile imaginations of the hell-sayers, the sum total of my experience with the opposite sex, at least while I lived in the dormitories, added up to a makeout session with Laura Garcia in a pile of leaves behind the hall housing the retired priests, during which she lost her purse and her roommates, apparently convinced she wasn't still with me willingly, called Campus Security when we weren't back by midnight.

Somehow, I fail to find that hellworthy. Sadly, if I would have been brave enough to confront my collegiate accusers, I could have told them that the only activities I undertook of a sexual nature that they could rightly condemn me for were those that could be conducted in my solitary dorm room. If you can be sent to hell for that, then God just likes to kick guys when they're down.

Although I have since graduated from college, I find myself still subject to hell-talk, and am occasionally surprised to hear it from a familiar source. In particular, I have an uncle who, about seven years ago, switched over his soul's allegiance from the Detroit Tigers to Jesus.

Now, I have nothing against Jesus, but there is something disconcerting about having someone in your family undergo a full evangelical transplant. It's not just that Bible verses start popping up in your birthday cards or that my poor sister, continually screwed in the holiday name draw, has received the Christian rock version of *Now, That's What I Call Music*, for four years in a row now.

No, what's really frustrating is the look my aunt and uncle now share, which they apparently believe to be private but which obviously says, "And that's why the entire family is going to hell, besides us." In the past few years, everyone in my family, with the possible exception of me, has been consigned to the pit by that look.

For my sister, it was a pair of low-rise jeans that sent her down the pike. My brother was tripped up by his appreciation for Harry Potter, while my mom still hasn't been entirely forgiven for chipping my uncle's tooth in 1967. If I have managed to escape, it's only because I grew up in their pre-Christian era, and have plenty of dirt on them - stories they used to tell about bar fights and stealing cigarettes from my grandma. The fact that I live out of state probably doesn't hurt either.

While the hell talk of my family is frustrating, if largely harmless, and the Notre Dame sermons worked to remind me of the gulf between my imaginary and actual love life, I find that the most imaginative accounts on my soul's future suffering generally come from random people that yell at me on the street.

For some reason these sermons are always directed towards me, which makes me worry that either A: the people giving them have some kind of radar that tells them I'm a good person to talk to, because I'm going to be homeless myself someday, or B: my style of dress and preferred haircut makes them think I'm already homeless.

Either way, these sermons are the most effective kind, because they're scary. The effect of being yelled at by a man who's missing most of his teeth and smells like he's horribly confused the separate roles of toilet and washing machine is that you tend to take him seriously, especially when he's talking about how bad things can get. He knows. Also, what street corner seminars may lack in coherence is usually more than made up for in delivery. There's nothing like peppering a sermon with expletives, threats, and pleas for money to keep the itinerant sinner on his toes.

In a lifetime of hell talks, the most memorable I've ever been subject to was delivered by a deranged man on a Greyhound bus. I would like to point out that being considered the deranged man on a

Greyhound bus is like being the mayor of crazytown. Our preacher, who began the trip by occupying the driver's seat and threatening anyone who came near him, started the homily as we rolled out of the bus station.

It began simply enough—to demonstrate his belief that it's important to know the Bible forwards and backwards, he started with Amen and worked his way back for a while before making a graceful transition to how the bus driver was planning to kill us. This segued nicely into a conspiracy theory involving Virgin Records, Rite-Aid, and the Greyhound bus line, which he followed up with some threats to random passengers before getting to the meat of the sermon.

As we rolled through the hills of central Pennsylvania, he let us have it, he told it like it was, he shouted in a great, big, booming voice that judgment day was upon us, that we were sinners, doomed to an eternity of torment in the burning flames of Hell, and that this terrible fate was far nearer than any of us realized, because the bus driver was trying to kill us.

Where the sermon went from there, I don't know, although I'm sure the two police officers who came to take him away from the Prince of Prussia bus station marveled at hearing the ties that bound together Virgin Megastores, Rite-Aid, and our bus driver's nefarious plot.