

Hell is a Place on Earth

In a world with money, most people can do little more than shuffle themselves, and their kids, around in the same circles day after day, week after week, year after year.

“Money is the source of all evil. We must understand, no rich man enters the gates of Heaven.” Said Pastor Suarez.

We shuffled to and from school every week day, and we shuffled to and from church every few days. No one usually sat next to us, except for my mother’s equally destitute peers. Us kids kept a healthy distance, lest we be seen as having more in common than suffering. Even though we never donated more than a dollar per family, our mothers were tolerated because they were the most desperate singers, the most wild dancers, the loudest criers who often came to tears faster than everyone else. Our suffering was a virtue to be sought after like a mathematical limit, because no one actually wanted to suffer the way we did.

“Your sins pain the father. It’s easy to do the obvious – to not drink, not party, not curse, and go to church – but then we forget about the little things.” He paced back and forth on the stage, looking at everyone except us.

“When was the last time you helped a friend when they needed help with bills? When was the last time you helped a stranger? When was the last time you blessed a homeless man on the street?”

A tense silence settled over the room. They would say that this was the ‘spirit of God’ in the room.

Most people stayed clear of the single mothers with villages of children trailing behind them, afraid that they’d catch whatever illness it was that plagued us. Although they didn’t know exactly what we’d caught or how, they’d already diagnosed us.

That was fine with us. We stayed away from them because they pretended to believe in each other; because they believed their fancy button ups and ribbon dresses were proof enough they'd all been touched by God, and our rags were proof that we hadn't.

“Every time you ignore a homeless man, instead of introducing them to the kingdom of God, you spit in the face of God. It is not a burden to save. It is not a burden to be saved! Every time you sin, and a pain erupts in the middle of your heart, the father looks upon you and begs you to stop. He knows your heart, now you must know his.”

We had little to no decorum, because they thought so little of us anyway. We laid across the stained and green cushions of the foldable chairs and passed time peeling the paint off the legs. Our mother stopped pinching us for it about a year ago. We'd take bathroom breaks endlessly, even during the sermon. The bouncers at the door began limiting our bathroom breaks, which only made us stay in the bathroom for up to an hour at a time. We'd show up in the same dresses and slacks, and after a while, we stopped caring if they were clean or not. When we were old enough to evade our mother's palm and slap her back, she stopped forcing us into uniform.

“No soul is lost. All can be saved and welcomed to the Kingdom of Heaven. It is up to us believers to save the sinners of this world, and embrace them with patience and kindness so that they might see the Kingdom of God one day. All sinners are children of God.”

We stopped listening to the sermons because the pastor always ruined his otherwise decent speeches by putting God into it.

“God understands everyone's hearts, and you must understand the hearts of all around you, by letting God into your heart. You don't understand because you don't want to. You perpetuate your own ignorance by shielding your hearts from God.”

One summer one of us slit our wrists, not the real way but the attention seeking way, across the veins and not along them. Our mother refused to address it other than a general outcry to us all that we needed to stop our shenanigans or God was going to punish us. She never mentioned God outside of church until she was mad. We joked that we should crucify ourselves like Jesus.

The pastor continued.

“The explanation of all this crisis – wildfires, war, terrorism, poverty –”

People always side eyed us when he said anything about being poor.

“ – is because this is the devil’s domain, but only because we let it be! Right now, he is stronger than ever, controlling the masses with phones, TV, games, celebrity gossip and worldly worries– and how many of us are guilty of this? Your job is no exception. How many of us worry more about money than we do about our own salvation? Every single last one of us is guilty. When will we stand up, firmly, bravely, against the devil and his legacy on this Earth?”

The pastor had a special talent for missing the point and misleading us all, but we get it. Everyone has to make a living.

The older we got, and the more punished we became, the more we began to understand that people don’t actually believe things, people, or even life, can get better. It just becomes different. The bottom bunch crumble beneath everyone else’s feet like crunchy, autumn leaves. Even the atheists wait on Heaven to save them.

Now that we’re older, we shuffle from prison to prison; breakrooms with roaches, white rooms with special door knobs, and cells with dried piss on the floor. We sweep hallways, we serve tacos, like our mother did, but we also sell weed on the side. Our mother says God can save us. If God put Bill Gates on Earth, and blessed him too, there’s no way in hell he gives a damn

about us. Still, she's waiting. She waits for us to join her at church, waits for us to bow our heads before the pastor's rolex and kiss his shiny shoes. We're all waiting for something – Joshua waits to become rich off his side hustles, Adrian waits to become famous online, and Jenna waits on her man to get promoted at work.

“¿Qué esperas? ¿A que el cielo caiga en tus manos?”

Good question, mother. I'm not waiting for anything. I don't have to. It's been made up for me in the advanced world behind meeting rooms; in the bustling cities under highway bridges; in the sleepy towns with dark cellars; in the cozy homes concealing private hard drives; in their fitted pockets clutching coke bags; in their seemingly clean hands; in their hearts that pump someone else's blood.