



THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

Year 2011

Article 18

1-1-2011

Bible Bolt

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Class of 2011

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Flynn, Kathleen M. (2011) "Bible Bolt," *The Mercury*: Year 2011, Article 18.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2011/iss1/18>

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Keywords

creative writing, non-fiction

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Kathleen Flynn is a senior English major with a Writing minor. She's going to Disney World right after graduation and she might just move into Cinderella's castle and never leave.

BIBLE BOLT

KATHLEEN FLYNN

The South will always confuse me. From its impressively continued grudge towards the North, to its insistence on maintaining a slow as molasses pace in everything but football, this should be a region that I should admire for its sheer stubbornness. Yet, there's something about this particular region that sets my teeth on edge, and I think I can pinpoint it to one specific aspect: the Bible Belt. There was something about having someone else's religion thrown constantly in my face that irritated me.

For most of my Easter recesses as a child, my family would pack our bags, hitch up our camper, and begin the long drive down to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. The half-sister I actually liked lived down there, and Myrtle Beach was always sunny and warm as opposed to Long Island, New York. Or so it seemed to me at the time.

One break about ten years ago, my parents decided that it was time for me to actually go out and meet some kids my age at the campground. While my brother picked up new friends at every place we stayed, I generally stuck close to my sister, spending most of the time riding my bike, going to the pool, or riding my bike to the pool. Tired of having me hang around the campsite, my parents sent me off to participate in a basketball tournament.

To explain a few things, Lakewood was not just a campground. In my mind, it was a super campground. There were over three hundred sites, each one slightly cramped and covered by a sheet of concrete. The idea for these beach resorts was to get as many people in one place as possible. This was not a campground for tenters; instead, it was a haven for those with huge RV's with multiple satellite dishes sprouting from their roofs and giant awnings encompassing the entire site. These coverings came in handy since there were maybe five trees total in this campground; my mother always requested a site with shade, but I can imagine the amusement of the receptionist on the other end of the line.

"Sure, honey, we'll put you in some shade," she would say, and we would always end up with a spot that had a bush which cast a small shadow on the ground and provided minimal privacy.

This campground was just one of three on a long stretch of road. Like its neighbors, Ocean Lakes and Pirateland, Lakewood had two pools (one of them indoors), the ubiquitous arcade with games from Whack-A-Mole to skee ball, a snack bar run by slow Southern old ladies, two miniature golf courses, a paddle-boat pond, a series of beachside condos, a dance hall, and a chapel. There were no Smokey the Bear signs in sight and marshmallows were hard to find. So, when I said that my parents sent me

down to the basketball court, I really meant that they ordered me to a fenced-in, five court complex complete with painted keys and three-point arches.

I reluctantly walked over, leaving my bike behind. I ended up on a team of misfits since most everybody else had already formed their three-person teams well beforehand. The games were soon underway, and it quickly became obvious that I wasn't making any friends. I was at that age where girls tend to be taller than boys—and I happened to be taller than most girls, so I towered over the competition. It wasn't exactly comforting to hear the fathers watching complain about the big girl crushing their sons, and I was anxious for the game to be over.

The tournament overseers finally called a timeout for what I thought was going to be a water break. It was a relatively hot day down in Myrtle Beach, and sweat was running down my face, leaving sticky trails behind. My hands were dirty from dribbling the basketball, so black smudges decorated my cheeks. I'd also added a few new bruises to my knees from diving after loose balls. Once that timeout was called, I made a beeline for the fence opening, only to reach it just as one of the organizers shut it. I stood there, stupefied.

The man, wearing a white Lakewood polo and khaki shorts, smiled and said, "If you could just take a seat over there, that'd be great."

I nodded warily and made my way over to where the other children were sitting under the basketball hoop. I sat down and pulled my knees against my chest, waiting for whatever was about to happen. I was hot, thirsty, alienated, and quickly becoming annoyed.

The man who had shut the gate walked out in front of us with a wide, toothy smile. His skin had a leathery texture with deep creases forming brackets around his mouth. Clearly, smiling was an almost permanent state for him. His sandy hair was brushed back off a receding hairline, probably covering an ever-growing bald spot. His blue polo shirt was resplendent, almost as pristine as the socks he wore with his sandals and had pulled up over his calves but not quite reaching his knees.

"How are all you kids doing today?" he asked.

We mumbled under our breaths, "Fine."

"That's great! Now, who wants a dollar?" he asked, pulling forth a crisp one dollar bill from his pocket. A young tan boy sitting in the front jumped up and grabbed it, probably thinking of what ice cream flavor he could buy with that money. "See folks? Did you see how he jumped up and grabbed that dollar? Now, that's how God wants you to accept him. Have y'all found Jesus, kids? Well, I'm going to tell you how the Lord came into my life. It started one day as I was walking along this very beach..."

He then proceeded to tell us how Jesus walked into his life and made him a Born-Again Christian, changing his life forever. I'm pretty sure I sat there, mouth open in horror as I realized what exactly I had gotten myself into. This was not the simple three-on-three tournament I had originally

signed up for; no, this was Baptist basketball, and I wanted no part of it.

I'd grown up in a town so Catholic, that two churches on the same block were required to serve the entire population. I'd gone to Catholic school, played CYO basketball, and was in a Girl Scout troop that regularly completed badges that involved further devotion to the Virgin Mary. When I was much younger, I'd convinced myself that there were only Catholics and those Catholics came in two forms: Italian and Irish. Later, as I started playing intramural soccer, I heard about Jewish traditions and even thought there might theoretically be other Christian sects. But up until now, I'd remained secure and untouched in my insular world.

Therefore, this religious interlude in the basketball tournament came as a complete shock. Once the tournament was over, I wandered back to the campsite in a daze. My mom noticed the perplexed expression on my face and came over to me, worried. "Kathleen, what happened?"

I looked up at her. "Mom, they tried to make me like Jesus."

"Kathleen, you go to Church, and it's Easter. Of course you like Jesus," she said in her best Mom voice. She wore her usual camping attire: a sleeveless pink button-down blouse with a pair of jean shorts. On her feet were the Bass flipflops she purchased every year. I'm almost positive her closet is home to many a worn-through pair of thong sandals given her tendency to throw nothing out. Her skin was already freckling, too, tanning at a faster rate than mine ever would; I'd inherited the fair Irish skin and burned at the first graze of a sunbeam. A practical pair of sunglasses perched above the Convey nose, which my brother had gotten from her. The glasses continued to slide down its long, flat surface, interrupting her task at hand.

"But Mom, this was a completely different Jesus. He's weird. He walks around on the beach and makes people like him."

My mother glared at me and went back to chopping up the boiled Easter eggs she was making into a colorful salad for my dad. "Stop being ridiculous."

I'm sure that my mother, being the deeply religious woman she is, was annoyed with my cavalier treatment towards Jesus. She made sure we attended Mass each Sunday, and there would be times when we were camping that we'd travel for hours searching for a Catholic Mass; whenever that happened, we'd end up saying a few Hail Marys or Our Fathers in the van. It wasn't exactly the most sacred space, with the portable toilet by one seat and the television looking down at us in the place of honor, but it made do. My father rarely accompanied us on these missions to find a place to worship. He had been previously married and had obtained a divorce and not an annulment as the Church required; as a result, he was no longer able to receive communion at Mass. When he and my mom were first married, my mother stopped going to Mass for fear that by marrying someone who had

been theoretically excommunicated from the Church, she had been tarred with the same brush. She and my father didn't even have a religious ceremony for their wedding and instead were married in their home. After speaking with a local priest, however, she went back to attending church services, my father frequently going with her only to stand in the back as the rest of the congregation shuffled forward to receive the Eucharist.

That experience definitely opened up my mind to the possibility of different Christian groups, let alone different religions. To me, Christian equaled Catholic. While Catholicism is the largest sect of Christianity in the United States, there are many more Protestants when all the different branches are taken into consideration. When I went back home, I suddenly realized the reason our church didn't use what I thought was the small chapel across the street from St. Aidan's "upper school." It wasn't a Catholic chapel but an Episcopal church that held services every Sunday. I also realized that the kids who attended the public school next to ours weren't all Catholic and that a bar mitzvah was not someplace where adults went to drink. I went from being a completely ignorant child to a somewhat informed but still confused "tween."

My mother had wanted to instill a deep connection to our Catholic background and insisted on sending us to the parochial despite the high tuition prices coupled with the extreme school taxes that went hand and hand with living on Long Island. A big part of my family's faith was quietly worshipping. We weren't "holy rollers," as my mom would say; instead, it was almost as if my mother had taken to heart the line of scripture from Matthew 6:5: "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men." To my family, prayer and religion was a private affair marked by quests for local churches and quiet prayers murmured before bedtime. Even in our home church, we sat in the left transept, which was largely filled with similar people. These people were not the heads of the CYO program or the Rosary Society or the St. Aidan's PTA; instead, they were the regulars, the ones who attended Mass each Sunday with little fanfare. My parents felt comfortable with these people, and they quickly became the individuals that, along with my parents, I modeled my own life of faith. As a result, I was almost completely unprepared for the events in Lakewood where the people wore their Baptist affiliation like I wore my Virgin Mary Girl Scout badges.

But the South was someplace I'd never understand. The next time we drove down was not around a major Christian holiday. It was simply part of our summer vacation. This time, I noticed a few things. Before, counting the signs for Pedro's Fireworks at South of the Border was the highlight of my trip; now, I noticed that for every "Pedro's Weather Report: Chili Today, Hot Tamale" sign, there was a "Jesus Saves" or "Buckle up; God is watching" one. We'd drive by three crosses arranged like the ones I'd see at Church for

Good Friday, followed by signs for the nearest location where friends in Christ could gather. And finally, when we pulled in Lakewood for yet another stay, I saw that beneath the "Welcome, Families" billboard was a quote from scripture that they changed every day.

Needless to say, I avoided all basketball tournaments during that stay. As years went by, my family gradually began to prefer the Pirateland campground with its lazy river pool and secular environment. There were only so many times my parents could enjoy staying next to youth groups singing hymns around the campfire into the night. Life was a little less awkward when my mother was allowed to stop explaining to the women that she'd met by the pool or the laundromat why we would not be attending the sunrise service that morning. As the years went by and spring sports began to dominate those Easter breaks, we stopped heading down to Myrtle Beach and it turned out to be a fortunate decision.

Each Easter, I'd pull out my pastel, flower-smothered dress while my brother was stuffed into a sports jacket as my mom attempted to thread a tie around his neck. I'd buckle my white dress shoes that would immediately get smudged when I stepped out of the trailer. We'd then get into our giant blue van and head down to the Myrtle Beach Convention Center which the small, local Catholic church would rent out for Easter. The overwhelming number of tourists just could not be accommodated within the small confines of the tiny building. We'd sit in the stands as the priest stood down below, championship banners from various sports teams at odds with the lilies and imported crucifix the church had brought in. It was a nice, if not weird, Easter Sunday. But that quickly came to an end when the Convention Center chose to rent out the arena to an entirely different event: the state cheerleading competition. I'll admit that I was much more comfortable in my own church with its high ceilings and robin-egg blue walls. And this building was large enough to fit the thousand or so worshippers that turned out for Easter Sunday. Yet the South continued to fascinate me.

While I don't fully understand the so-called "Bible Belt," I can appreciate Southerners' devotion. When describing why religion was so prevalent in his novels that were set in the South, William Faulkner simply said, "It's just there." He made it sound like it would be impossible to not include this aspect in his work, and, based on the environment in which he chose to set his plots, I can completely understand.

According to the United States census, nearly 86% of people living in the South believe in God. The majority of these people can be Southern Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal, Episcopalian, or Pentecostal. Historians have cited the importance of the South as a stronghold for the Anglican religion largely because the later shifts of immigration did not settle there. Of the largely Catholic or Jewish immigrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, few chose to put down roots in the South,

instead settling in the large industrial cities of the North. And although there are regions in the South that are not dominated by Protestantism (like Florida and areas surrounding New Orleans), religion is one of the dominant characteristics of the South. Southerners often used their religion to, as one historian says, defend “‘The South’ itself because attacks against it were as often based on morality as on economics, politics, or other rationales.” Also, the South was a strong breeding ground for spirituality with the influence of the religious systems of Native Americans and African Americans on styles of worship and mourning rites. Religion became part of the South’s identity and, for better or worse, just one aspect that determined how the rest of the country views it.

From what I have seen, Southerners embrace this stereotype with a relish that almost reaches Paula Deen’s love of butter. I can’t say that they are unfriendly; rather some of the most outgoing individuals I’ve met have hailed from the Sun Belt. But I have always had an aversion to people wishing to knock me over the head with a Bible, even in my own denomination. Personally, I blame this on Frank Emmanuel from first grade who tried to give me a saint trading card, an action which all the other students were quick to ridicule as I uncomfortably put the Saint Catherine of Sienna card back in its laminated slot. As I moved on to high school, I continued to practice my brand of Catholicism which called for a great deal of questioning and unwilling participation. While I attended Catholic high school, I chose the so-called “public school with uniforms,” the institution that did not get recognized by the local newspaper for its pilgrimage to the movie theater on Good Friday to see Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ*. As I grew older, I stopped resenting the pageantry and total predictability of the Catholic Mass. I enjoyed my religion classes and became a Eucharistic minister my senior year, but I lacked a distinct enthusiasm for participating in the various Right to Life and Mission Clubs my school sponsored. Once I moved on to college, I relished the notion that I could now choose if I would attend Mass or not, recklessly uncaring if this was, technically, a venial sin. My stance on religion even caused a rift between myself and my freshman roommate; she had looked forward to sharing a room with a fellow Catholic and tried relentlessly during the first few weeks to convince me to go with her to the Newman Society meetings and Mass during the weekdays. It was not until she stopped asking me to go with her that I began to attend Mass again, sitting in the back of the chapel at the far end of one pew. My faith actually became a big part of how I finally became comfortable at Gettysburg College; that hour of repeated actions that once irked me to no end now provided an hour of meditation and prayer that I realized I needed. While I signed up to read scripture during the liturgy from time to time, I never became fully involved with the community, instead preferring to sit in my pew and read along with the priest in the weekly missalatte. Gettysburg

became an important place for my faith formation, building on the foundation my mother had anticipated when I was only in kindergarten.

Given that I presently attend college near one of the largest battlefields, it should hardly surprise me that the Civil War was a large part of the formation of the South's religious consciousness and the Southern Baptist denomination in particular. The Southern Baptist denomination was formed in the heat of the abolitionist movement as its Northern counterpart adamantly refused to allow its congregation to own slaves. As the war progressed, more and more Confederate soldiers became Southern Baptists. Yet the South's loss in the war nearly destroyed this Christian denomination as the Northern Baptists swooped in with the carpetbaggers and preachers could only speak from the pulpit if they swore they had never supported the Confederacy. As a result, Southern Baptists and Protestant Christianity became a large part of regional identity. According to one *TIME* magazine article, Southern Baptists churches were closely connected to "high-decibel evangelism and opposition to the Pope, Darwin, smoking, dancing, and drinking." Even as late as the 1960s, there was a definite negative attitude towards Catholicism in the South, a perspective that came into the national view when John F. Kennedy, a Catholic from Boston, ran for President. Wallie Criswell, pastor of a Baptist Church in Texas, expressed an opinion that was only slightly more extreme than those of his brethren.

"Catholicism," he said, "is a political system that, like an octopus, covers the entire world and threatens our basic freedoms." In the fifty years since that election, the South has been in a slow cycle of change.

If the basketball tournament I participated in was any indication, the South still has some tendencies towards over-enthusiastic evangelism. Yet, there has been a growing movement towards acceptance of other religions in the South. Part of this has to do with the splintering of Southern Baptists and part has to do with the influx of immigrants from Central America and the snowbirds from up north questing for warmth and sunshine. There are now larger communities of Catholics, Hindus, and Muslims. David Goldfield, a professor of religion at University of North Carolina, states, "Given the widespread respect that religion holds in the region, in some instances it is easier to practice a minority religion. Even so, given the historic religious and ethnic conformity of the South, toleration may not translate to respect." While my religion may be tolerated, there will be people convinced that I'm looking for a religious upgrade when I go to the South.

I saw this attitude two years ago, the last time my family went down to Myrtle Beach to visit my sister. It was in the middle of the summer and Pirateland was booked while Lakewood still had several vacancies. So we pulled our trailer into its campsite and looked at the announcement of activities in the hope of something to do. And we found it under the heading of "Entertainment." There was no description, just a pair of jolly

music notes bobbing next to the bolded words. My mom decided that, as a form of family bonding, we'd all attend. We walked over to the activity hall and took our seats at a picnic table covered in the typical red and white checkered cloth.

A group of five men stood at the front of the room, right next to the microphone and giant bingo machine. They wore khaki shorts and collared shirts; at first, I couldn't understand why they were wearing shoestrings around their necks, but my mom impatiently explained that they were bolo ties and were popular. The lady at the piano started to play and the men began to sing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." The piano sounded like every church instrument of its ilk; it tinkered as the woman merrily plunked her plump fingers along the ivory keys. The instrument was slightly out of tune, making the hymns all the more jarring. At first, I mostly resented missing a specific episode of a television show for this hokey sing-along. Then I realized something. Once again, this campground was guilty of extreme false advertising.

The people at the front would pause in between each song for a brief prayer. One woman stood over by the unused bingo cage, her blonde hair curled tightly against her temples while her pink lipstick was nearly fluorescent in the dim lighting. A small child sat next to her, singing softly along to the hymns while a rowdy group of teenagers hung out in the back, their rapidly chewing mouths indicating they were busy with gum and not with the word of God. The men leading the group had fine tenor voices yet the words they were singing barely even made sense to me at the time. In fact, as I looked back on this event, I could barely make out the details. It was as if I had survived a traumatic event, and it wasn't until I thought back carefully that the memories began to reform, crashing in like a graceless tsunami.

"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" was followed by "Amazing Grace," which was followed by a bunch of hymns I didn't know. My family was the only group at the "Entertainment" event not singing along. The people at the front had zeroed in on us; their khaki and blue polo shirt uniforms were as frightening as any cult garb. They all had smiles plastered on their faces as well as an unnerving tendency of ending every sentence with a heartfelt, "Amen!" As they moved towards us, my mom decided that a better form of family bonding would be bolting from the activity pavilion. She gripped my shoulder, muttered something along the lines of the hamburgers burning, and we made our escape. We left the pavilion behind, the cheerful music clanking in our wake.

The trend of bolting from Bible thumpers while visiting the South has become a bit of a family tradition. Since then, I've learned to tolerate the religious over-exuberance found in the South. But I will admit, that like David Goldfield said, toleration doesn't exactly translate to respect.