

# America's New Religions

By Andrew Sullivan

Everyone has a religion. It is, in fact, impossible not to have a religion if you are a human being. It's in our genes and has expressed itself in every culture, in every age, including our own secularized husk of a society.

By religion, I mean something quite specific: a practice not a theory; a way of life that gives meaning, a meaning that cannot really be defended without recourse to some transcendent value, undying "Truth" or God (or gods).

Which is to say, even today's atheists are expressing an attenuated form of religion. Their denial of any God is as absolute as others' faith in God, and entails just as much a set of values to live by — including, for some, daily rituals like meditation, a form of prayer. (There's a reason, I suspect, that many brilliant atheists, like my friends Bob Wright and Sam Harris are so influenced by Buddhism and practice Vipassana meditation and mindfulness. Buddhism's genius is that it is a religion without God.)

In his highly entertaining book, *The Seven Types of Atheism*, released in October in the U.S., philosopher John Gray puts it this way: "Religion is an attempt to find meaning in events, not a theory that tries to explain the universe." It exists because we humans are the only species, so far as we can know, who have evolved to know explicitly that, one day in the future, we will die. And this existential fact requires some way of reconciling us to it while we are alive.

This is why science cannot replace it. Science does not tell you how to live, or what life is about; it can provide hypotheses and tentative explanations, but no ultimate meaning. Art can provide an escape from the deadliness of our daily doing, but, again, appreciating great art or music is ultimately an act of wonder and contemplation, and has almost nothing to say about morality and life.

Ditto history. My late friend, Christopher Hitchens, with a certain glee, gave me a copy of his book, *God Is Not Great*, a fabulous grab bag of religious insanity and evil over time, which I enjoyed immensely and agreed with almost entirely. But the fact that religion has been so often abused for nefarious purposes — from burning people at the stake to enabling child rape to crashing airplanes into towers — does not resolve the question of whether the meaning of that religion is true. It is perfectly possible to see and record

the absurdities and abuses of man-made institutions and rituals, especially religious ones, while embracing a way of life that these evil or deluded people preached but didn't practice. Fanaticism is not synonymous with faith; it is merely faith at its worst. That's what I told Hitch: great book, made no difference to my understanding of my own faith or anyone else's. Sorry, old bean, but try again.

Seduced by scientism, distracted by materialism, insulated, like no humans before us, from the vicissitudes of sickness and the ubiquity of early death, the post-Christian West believes instead in something we have called progress — a gradual ascent of mankind toward reason, peace, and prosperity — as a substitute in many ways for our previous monotheism. We have constructed a capitalist system that turns individual selfishness into a collective asset and showers us with earthly goods; we have leveraged science for our own health and comfort. Our ability to extend this material bonanza to more and more people is how we define progress; and progress is what we call meaning. In this respect, Steven Pinker is one of the most religious writers I've ever admired. His faith in reason is as complete as any fundamentalist's belief in God.

But none of this material progress beckons humans to a way of life beyond mere satisfaction of our wants and needs. And this matters. We are a meaning-seeking species. Gray recounts the experiences of two extraordinarily brilliant nonbelievers, John Stuart Mill and Bertrand Russell, who grappled with this deep problem. Here's Mill describing the nature of what he called "A Crisis in My Mental History":

"I had what might truly be called an object in life: to be a reformer of the world. ... This did very well for several years, during which the general improvement going on in the world and the idea of myself as engaged with others in struggling to promote it, seemed enough to fill up an interesting and animated existence. But the time came when I awakened from this as from a dream ... In this frame of mind it occurred to me to put the question directly to myself: 'Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions that you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant; would this be a great joy and happiness to you?' And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered: 'No!'"

At that point, this architect of our liberal order, this most penetrating of minds, came to the conclusion: "I seemed to have nothing left to live for." It took a while for him to recover.

Russell, for his part, abandoned Christianity at the age of 18, for the usual modern reasons, but the question of ultimate meaning still nagged at him. One day, while visiting the sick wife of a colleague, he described what happened: “Suddenly the ground seemed to give away beneath me, and I found myself in quite another region. Within five minutes I went through some such reflections as the following: the loneliness of the human soul is unendurable; nothing can penetrate it except the highest intensity of the sort of love that religious teachers have preached; whatever does not spring from this motive is harmful, or at best useless.”

I suspect that most thinking beings end up with this notion of intense love as a form of salvation and solace as a kind of *instinct*. Those whose minds have been opened by psychedelics affirm this truth even further. I saw a bumper sticker the other day. It said “Loving kindness is my religion.” But the salient question is: why?

Our modern world tries extremely hard to protect us from the sort of existential moments experienced by Mill and Russell. Netflix, air-conditioning, sex apps, Alexa, kale, Pilates, Spotify, Twitter ... they’re all designed to create a world in which we rarely get a second to confront ultimate meaning — until a tragedy occurs, a death happens, or a diagnosis strikes. Unlike any humans before us, we take those who are much closer to death than we are and sequester them in nursing homes, where they cannot remind us of our own fate in our daily lives. And if you pressed, say, the liberal elites to explain what they really believe in — and you have to look at what they do most fervently — you discover, in John Gray’s mordant view of Mill, that they do, in fact, have “an orthodoxy — the belief in improvement that is the unthinking faith of people who think they have no religion.”

But the banality of the god of progress, the idea that the best life is writing explainers for Vox in order to make the world a better place, never quite slakes the thirst for something deeper. Liberalism is a set of procedures, with an empty center, not a manifestation of truth, let alone a reconciliation to mortality. But, critically, it has long been complemented and supported in America by a religion distinctly separate from politics, a tamed Christianity that rests, in Jesus’ formulation, on a distinction between God and Caesar. And this separation is vital for liberalism, because if your ultimate meaning is derived from religion, you have less need of deriving it from politics or ideology or trusting entirely in a single, secular leader. It’s only when your meaning has been secured that you can allow politics to be merely procedural.

So what happens when this religious rampart of the entire system is removed? I think what happens is illiberal politics. The need for meaning hasn't gone away, but without Christianity, this yearning looks to politics for satisfaction. And religious impulses, once anchored in and tamed by Christianity, find expression in various political cults. These political manifestations of religion are new and crude, as all new cults have to be. They haven't been experienced and refined and modeled by millennia of practice and thought. They are evolving in real time. And like almost all new cultish impulses, they demand a total and immediate commitment to save the world.

Now look at our politics. We have the cult of Trump on the right, a demigod who, among his worshippers, can do no wrong. And we have the cult of social justice on the left, a religion whose followers show the same zeal as any born-again Evangelical. They are filling the void that Christianity once owned, without any of the wisdom and culture and restraint that Christianity once provided.

For many, especially the young, discovering a new meaning in the midst of the fallen world is thrilling. And social-justice ideology does everything a religion should. It offers an account of the whole: that human life and society and any kind of truth must be seen entirely as a function of social power structures, in which various groups have spent all of human existence oppressing other groups. And it provides a set of practices to resist and reverse this interlocking web of oppression — from regulating the workplace and policing the classroom to checking your own sin and even seeking to control language itself. I think of non-PC gaffes as the equivalent of old swear words. Like the puritans who were agape when someone said “goddamn,” the new faithful are scandalized when someone says something “problematic.” Another commonality of the zealot then and now: humorlessness.

And so the young adherents of the Great Awokening exhibit the zeal of the Great Awakening. Like early modern Christians, they punish heresy by banishing sinners from society or coercing them to public demonstrations of shame, and provide an avenue for redemption in the form of a thorough public confession of sin. “Social justice” theory requires the admission of white privilege in ways that are strikingly like the admission of original sin. A Christian is born again; an activist gets woke. To the belief in human progress unfolding through history — itself a remnant of Christian eschatology — it adds the Leninist twist of a cadre of heroes who jump-start the revolution.

The same cultish dynamic can be seen on the right. There, many profess nominal Christianity and yet demonstrate every day that they have left it far

behind. Some exist in a world without meaning altogether, and that fate is never pretty. I saw this most vividly when examining the opioid epidemic. People who have lost religion and are coasting along on materialism find they have few interior resources to keep going when crisis hits. They have no place of refuge, no spiritual safe space from which to gain perspective, no God to turn to. Many have responded to the collapse of meaning in dark times by simply and logically numbing themselves to death, extinguishing existential pain through ever-stronger painkillers that ultimately kill the pain of life itself.

Yes, many Evangelicals are among the holiest and most quietly devoted people out there. Some have bravely resisted the cult. But their leaders have turned Christianity into a political and social identity, not a lived faith, and much of their flock — a staggering 81 percent voted for Trump — has signed on. They have tribalized a religion explicitly built by Jesus as anti-tribal. They have turned to idols — including their blasphemous belief in America as God's chosen country. They have embraced wealth and nationalism as core goods, two ideas utterly anathema to Christ. They are indifferent to the destruction of the creation they say they believe God made. And because their faith is unmoored but their religious impulse is strong, they seek a replacement for religion. This is why they could suddenly rally to a cult called Trump. He may be the least Christian person in America, but his persona met the religious need their own faiths had ceased to provide. The terrible truth of the last three years is that the fresh appeal of a leader-cult has overwhelmed the fading truths of Christianity.

This is why they are so hard to reach or to persuade and why nothing that Trump does or could do changes their minds. You cannot argue logically with a religion — which is why you cannot really argue with social-justice activists either. And what's interesting is how support for Trump is greater among those who do not regularly attend church than among those who do.

And so we're mistaken if we believe that the collapse of Christianity in America has led to a decline in religion. It has merely led to religious impulses being expressed by political cults. Like almost all new cultish impulses, they see no boundary between politics and their religion. And both cults really do minimize the importance of the individual in favor of either the oppressed group or the leader.

And this is how they threaten liberal democracy. They do not believe in the primacy of the individual, they believe the ends justify the means, they do not allow for doubt or reason, and their religious politics can brook no compromise. They demonstrate, to my mind, how profoundly liberal

democracy has actually depended on the complement of a tolerant Christianity to sustain itself — as many earlier liberals (Tocqueville, for example) understood.

It is Christianity that came to champion the individual conscience against the collective, which paved the way for individual rights. It is in Christianity that the seeds of Western religious toleration were first sown. Christianity is the only monotheism that seeks no sway over Caesar, that is content with the ultimate truth over the immediate satisfaction of power. It was Christianity that gave us successive social movements, which enabled more people to be included in the liberal project, thus renewing it. It was on these foundations that liberalism was built, and it is by these foundations it has endured. The question we face in contemporary times is whether a political system built upon such a religion can endure when belief in that religion has become a shadow of its future self.

Will the house still stand when its ramparts are taken away? I'm beginning to suspect it can't. And won't.

## **What's Left?**

Here are a couple of questions for Democrats about two of their potential 2020 candidates: What motivated Kirsten Gillibrand's widely noted tweet this week? And why is there so much discontent on the left with Elizabeth Warren?

On Tuesday evening, Gillibrand tweeted: "Our future is female. Intersectional. Powered by our belief in one another. And we're just getting started." I get the point: Women are succeeding more than ever before, are poised to do even better, and this is a great thing. But why express this as if men are also not part of the future? And "intersectional"? It's telling that, in Democratic circles, this is such a mainstream word now that she doesn't have to explain it to anyone.

Gillibrand's evolution, of course, has been long in the works — and reveals, I'd say, where the Democrats are going. When Gillibrand was a member of Congress, she identified as a Blue Dog conservative Democrat. She once campaigned in defense of gun rights, was in favor of cracking down on illegal immigration, voted against the 2008 bank bailout, and opposed marriage equality. Fast-forward a decade and look at the change.

She first reversed her previous anti-gay positions, and was even instrumental in ending the gay ban in the military. By 2015, she invited Emma Sulkowicz to

the State of the Union, a person who alleged they had been raped at Columbia University, despite Columbia's, the NYPD's, and the district attorney general's investigations ending without a finding of rape, indeed finding "a lack of reasonable suspicion." On social media, Sulkowicz was known as "Mattress Girl," carrying an extra-long twin around the campus to exemplify the burden they felt (Sulkowicz identifies as nonbinary) and to pressure Columbia into expelling her alleged rapist. Gillibrand, who once opposed allowing illegal immigrants to get driving licenses, is also now a supporter of abolishing ICE.

And, of course, she famously engineered the resignation of one of the more talented Democrats in the Senate, Al Franken, because of a forced stage kiss, allegations of groping, and a photo of him pretending to grab a fellow USO entertainer's boobs. We won't ever get to the bottom of all that because Gillibrand demanded Franken's resignation merely on the basis of allegations, and within a day, Franken had resigned, before the Senate Ethics Committee had finished an investigation. "Enough is enough," she declared, invoking the "existing power structure of society" to end due process for Franken. I do not begrudge Gillibrand for her transformation, but it is hard to believe that political calculation was absent. She's running for president, and invoking the language of critical gender theory, she seems to believe, will help her in the primaries.

Then there's the Democratic backlash against Elizabeth Warren. You'd think it would be about her terrible political judgment, as demonstrated by her spectacular self-immolation on the "issue" of her claimed Native American ancestry. But no! The reason many Democrats have turned on her is that she used a DNA test at all to prove her family lore. From the *New York Times*: "She has yet to allay criticism from grass-roots progressive groups, liberal political operatives and other potential 2020 allies who complain that she put too much emphasis on the controversial field of racial science — and, in doing so, played into Mr. Trump's hands ... Ms. Warren has also troubled advocates of racial equality and justice, who say her attempt to document ethnicity with a D.N.A test gave validity to the idea that race is determined by blood — a bedrock principle for white supremacists and others who believe in racial hierarchies." The social-justice movement's suspicion of science, especially genetics, is at work here. And it is not "racial science" to examine your DNA to see which genetic subpopulation in the world you belong to, or where your ancestors lived. It's science.

So if you send off for a 23andMe test, in the view of many Democrats, you're a white supremacist! This seems to be where the Democratic Party now is. Hunker down for a second term of Donald J. Trump.

## A Moment of Truth

I almost never cry in movies, even tear-jerkers. But the other night, I sat down and watched *Darkest Hour*, the movie, now available on HBO, that follows (well, kinda) John Lukacs's account of the five days in May 1940 when Britain, its entire army stuck in France and its air force still woefully unequal to the Luftwaffe, stared into the abyss. Many in the elite believed that some kind of accommodation with Hitler was the only option — keeping him at bay and preserving much of the Empire. That policy of a peace treaty was, to my mind, a highly persuasive way forward in the naked short-term interest of the United Kingdom. Lord Halifax famously championed it in a vital cabinet meeting.

Something in Churchill resisted. There's a factually ridiculous but dramatically powerful scene when Winston jumps out of his official car and into the tube, where the passengers greet him first with British politeness (no mass selfies back then), and then begin a conversation. Churchill lays out the reasons for a peace treaty and asks the Londoners what they think of dealing with Hitler this way. "Never!" they shout back. "Never!" Interests be damned. A figure like Hitler has to be confronted and defeated. To slink away from this moral obligation violated their sense of patriotism, their understanding of what Britain meant to a world suffocating in tyranny. The great symbol of this refusal to appease was, of course, the rescue of the troops from Dunkirk by hundreds and hundreds of ordinary Brits in various boats and ships, defying Nazi control of the air to save their "boys" as they called them. It was an upwelling of moral purpose, of real grit against all the odds, and as I watched Gary Oldman deliver the "Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat" speech that Churchill gave in the Commons, my eyes were swimming.

Why had my response been so intense, I asked myself when my bout of blubbering had finally subsided? Part of it, of course, is my still-lingering love of the island I grew up in; part is my love of Churchill himself, in all his flaws and greatness. But I think it was mainly about how the people of Britain shook off the moral decadence of the foreign policy of the 1930s, how, beneath the surface, there were depths of feeling and determination that we never saw until an existential crisis hit, and an extraordinary figure seized the moment.

And I realized how profoundly I yearn for something like that to reappear in America. The toll of Trump is so deep. In so many ways, he has come close to delegitimizing this country and entire West, aroused the worst instincts within us, fed fear rather than confronting it, and has been rewarded for his depravity in the most depressing way by everything that is foul on the right and nothing that is noble.

I want to believe in America again, its decency and freedom, its hostility, bred in its bones, toward tyranny of any kind, its kindness and generosity. I need what someone once called the audacity of hope. I've witnessed this America ever since I arrived — especially its embrace of immigrants — which is why it is hard to see Trump tearing migrant children from their parents. That America is still out there, I tell myself, as the midterms demonstrated. It can build. But who, one wonders, is our Churchill? And when will he or she emerge?

See you next Friday.

# Everything That Rises Must Converge

by Flannery O'Connor

**HER DOCTOR** had told Julian's mother that she must lose twenty pounds on account of her blood pressure, so on Wednesday nights Julian had to take her downtown on the bus for a reducing class at the Y. The reducing class was designed for working girls over fifty, who weighed from 165 to 200 pounds. His mother was one of the slimmer ones, but she said ladies did not tell their age or weight. She would not ride the buses by herself at night since they had been integrated, and because the reducing class was one of her few pleasures, necessary for her health, and free, she said Julian could at least put himself out to take her, considering all she did for him. Julian did not like to consider all she did for him, but every Wednesday night he braced himself and took her.

She was almost ready to go, standing before the hall mirror, putting on her hat, while he, his hands behind him, appeared pinned to the door frame, waiting like Saint Sebastian for the arrows to begin piercing him. The hat was new and had cost her seven dollars and a half. She kept saying, "Maybe I shouldn't have paid that for it. No, I shouldn't have. I'll take it off and return it tomorrow. I shouldn't have bought it."

Julian raised his eyes to heaven. "Yes, you should have bought it," he said. "Put it on and let's go." It was a hideous hat. A purple velvet flap came down on one side of it and mood up on the other; the rest of it was green and looked like a cushion with the stuffing out. He decided it was less comical than jaunty and pathetic. Everything that gave her pleasure was small and depressed him.

She lifted the hat one more time and set it down slowly on top of her head. Two wings of gray hair protruded on either side of her florid face, but her eyes, sky-blue, were as innocent and untouched by experience as they must have been when she was ten. Were it not that she was a widow who had struggled fiercely to feed and clothe and put him through school and who was supporting him still, "until he got on his feet," she might have been a little girl that he had to take to town. "It's all right, it's all right," he said. "Let's go." He opened door himself and started down the walk to get her going. The sky was a dying violet and the houses stood out darkly against it, bulbous liver-colored monstrosities of a uniform ugliness though no two were alike. Since this had been a fashionable neighborhood forty years ago, his mother persisted in thinking they did well to have an apartment in it. Each house had a narrow collar of dirt around it in which sat, usually, a grubby child. Julian walked with his hands in his pockets, his head down and thrust forward and his eyes glazed with the determination to make himself completely numb during the time he would be sacrificed to her pleasure.

The door closed and he turned to find the dumpy figure, surmounted by the atrocious hat, coming toward him. "Well," she said, "you only live once and paying a little more for it, I at least won't meet myself coming and going."

"Some day I'll start making money," Julian said gloomily- he knew he never would - "and you can have one of those jokes whenever you take the fit." But first they would move. He visualized a place where the nearest neighbors would be three miles away on either side.

"I think you're doing fine," she said, drawing on her gloves. "You've only been out of school a

year. Rome wasn't built in a day."

She was one of the few members of the Y reducing class who arrived in hat and gloves and who had a son who had been to college. "It takes time," she said, "and the world is in such a mess. This hat looked better on me than any of the others, though when she brought it out I said, 'Take that thing back. I wouldn't have it on my head,' and she said, 'Now wait till you see it on,' and when she put it on me, I said, 'We-ull,' and she said, 'If you ask me, that hat does something for you and you do something for the hat, and besides,' she said, 'with that hat, you won't meet yourself coming and going.'"

Julian thought he could have stood his lot better if she had been selfish, if she had been an old hag who drank and screamed at him. He walked along, saturated in depression, as if in the midst of his martyrdom he had lost his faith. Catching sight of his long, hopeless, irritated face, she stopped suddenly with a grief-stricken look, and pulled back on his arm. "Wait on me," she said. "I'm going back to the house and take this thing off and tomorrow I'm going to return it. I was out of my head. I can pay the gas bill with that seven-fifty."

He caught her arm in a vicious grip. "You are not going to take it back," he said. "I like it."

"Well," she said, "I don't think I ought. . ." "Shut up and enjoy it," he muttered, more depressed than ever.

"With the world in the mess it's in," she said, "it's a wonder we can enjoy anything. I tell you, the bottom rail is on the top."

Julian sighed.

"Of course," she said, "if you know who you are, you can go anywhere." She said this every time he took her to the reducing class. "Most of them in it are not our kind of people," she said, "but I can be gracious to anybody. I know who I am."

"They don't give a damn for your graciousness," Julian said savagely. "Knowing who you are is good for one generation only. You haven't the foggiest idea where you stand now or who you are."

She stopped and allowed her eyes to flash at him. "I most certainly do know who I am," she said, "and if you don't know who you are, I'm ashamed of you."

"Oh hell," Julian said.

"Your great-grandfather was a former governor of this state," she said. "Your grandfather was a prosperous land-owner. Your grandmother was a Godhigh."

"Will you look around you," he said tensely, "and see where you are now?" and he swept his arm jerkily out to indicate the neighborhood, which the growing darkness at least made less dingy.

"You remain what you are," she said. "Your great-grand-father had a plantation and two hundred slaves."

"There are no more slaves," he said irritably.

"They were better off when they were," she said. He groaned to see that she was off on that topic. She rolled onto it every few days like a train on an open track. He knew every stop, every junction, every swamp along the way, and knew the exact point at which her conclusion would roil majestically into the station: "It's ridiculous. It's simply not realistic. They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence."

"Let's skip it," Julian said.

"The ones I feel sorry for," she said, "are the ones that are half white. They're tragic."

"Will you skip it?"

"Suppose we were half white. We would certainly have mixed feelings."

"I have mixed feelings now," he groaned.

"Well let's talk about something pleasant," she said. "I remember going to Grandpa's when I

was a little girl. Then the house had double stairways that went up to what was really the second floor - all the cooking was done on the first. I used to like to stay down in the kitchen on account of the way the walls smelled. I would sit with my nose pressed against the plaster and take deep breaths. Actually the place belonged to the Godhighs but your grandfather Chestny paid the mortgage and saved it for them. They were in reduced circumstances," she said, "but reduced or not, they never forgot who they were."

"Doubtless that decayed mansion reminded them," Julian muttered. He never spoke of it without contempt or thought of it without longing. He had seen it once when he was a child before it had been sold. The double stairways had rotted and been torn down. Negroes were living in it. But it remained in his mind as his mother had known it. It appeared in his dreams regularly. He would stand on the wide porch, listening to the rustle of oak leaves, then wander through the high-ceilinged hall into the parlor that opened onto it and gaze at the worn rugs and faded draperies. It occurred to him that it was he, not she, who could have appreciated it. He preferred its threadbare elegance to anything he could name and it was because of it that all the neighborhoods they had lived in had been a torment to him - whereas she had hardly known the difference. She called her insensitivity "being adjustable."

"And I remember the old darky who was my nurse, Caroline. There was no better person in the world. I've always had a great respect for my colored friends," she said. "I'd do anything in the world for them and they'd . . ."

"Will you for God's sake get off that subject?" Julian said. When he got on a bus by himself, he made it a point to sit down beside a Negro, in reparation as it were for his mother's sins.

"You're mighty touchy tonight," she said. "Do you feel all right?"

"Yes I feel all right" he said. "Now lay off."

She pursed her lips. "Well, you certainly are in a vile humor," she observed "I just won't speak to you at all."

They had reached the bus stop. There was no bus in sight and Julian, his hands still jammed in his pockets and his head thrust forward, scowled down the empty street. The frustration of having to wait on the bus as well as ride on it began to creep up his neck like a hot hand. The presence of his mother was borne in upon him as she gave a pained sigh. He looked at her bleakly. She was holding herself very erect under the preposterous hat wearing it like a banner of her imaginary dignity. There was in him an evil urge to break her spirit. He suddenly unloosened his tie and pulled it off and put it in his pocket

She stiffened. "Why must you look like that when you take me to town?" she said. "Why must you deliberately embarrass me?"

"If you'll never learn where you are," he said, "you can at least learn where I am."

"You look like a thug," she said.

"Then I must be one" he murmured.

"I'll just go home" she said. "I will not bother you. If you can't do a little thing' like that for me . . ."

Rolling his eyes upward, he put his tie back on. "Restored to my class," he muttered. He thrust his face toward her and hissed, "True culture is in the mind, the mind," he said, and tapped his head, "the mind."

"It's in the heart," she said, "and in how you do things and how you do things is because of who you are."

"Nobody in the damn bus cares who you are."

"I care who I am" she said icily.

The lighted bus appeared on top of the next hill and as it approached, they moved out into the street to meet it. He put his hand under her elbow and hoisted her up On the creaking step. She entered with a little smile, as if she were going into a drawing room where everyone had been waiting for her. While he put in the tokens, she sat down on one of the broad front seats for three which faced the aisle. A thin woman with protruding teeth and long yellow hair was sitting on the end of it. His mother moved up beside her and left room for Julian beside herself. He sat down and looked at the floor across the aisle where a pair of thin feet in red and white canvas sandals were planted.

His mother immediately began a general conversation meant to attract anyone who felt like talking. "Can it get any hotter?" she said and removed from her purse a folding fan, black with a Japanese scene on it, which she began to flutter before her.

"I reckon it might could," the woman with the protruding teeth said, "but I know for a fact my apartment couldn't get no hotter."

"It must get the afternoon sun," his mother said. She sat forward and looked up and down the bus. It was half filled. Everybody was white. "I see we have the bus to ourselves," she said. Julian cringed.

"For a change," said the woman across the aisle, the owner of the red and white canvas sandals. "I come on one the other day and they were thick as fleas—up front and all through."

"The world is in a mess everywhere," his mother said. "I don't know how we've let it get in this fix."

"What gets my goat is all those boys from good families stealing automobile tires," the woman with the protruding teeth said. "I told my boy, I said you may not be rich but you been raised right and if I ever catch you in any such mess, they can send you on to the reformatory. Be exactly where you belong."

"Training tells," his mother said. "Is your boy in high school?"

"Ninth grade," the woman said.

"My son just finished college last year. He wants to write but he's selling typewriters until he gets started," his mother said.

The woman leaned forward and peered at Julian. He threw her such a malevolent look that she subsided against the seat. On the floor across the aisle there was an abandoned newspaper. He got up and got it and opened it out in front of him. His mother discreetly continued the conversation in a lower tone but the woman across the aisle said in a loud voice, "Well that's nice. Selling typewriters is close to writing. He can go right from one to the other."

"I tell him," his mother said, "that Rome wasn't built in a day."

Behind the newspaper Julian was withdrawing into the inner compartment of his mind where he spent most of his time. This was a kind of mental bubble in which he established himself when he could not bear to be a part of what was going on around him. From it he could see out and judge but in it he was safe from any kind of penetration from without. It was the only place where he felt free of the general idiocy of his fellows. His mother had never entered it but from it he could see her with absolute clarity.

The old lady was clever enough and he thought that if she had started from any of the right premises, more might have been expected of her. She lived according to the laws of her own fantasy world outside of which he had never seen her set foot. The law of it was to sacrifice herself for him after she had first created the necessity to do so by making a mess of things. If he had permitted her sacrifices, it was only because her lack of foresight had made them necessary. All of her life had been a struggle to act like a Chestny and to give him everything she thought a

Chestny ought to have without the goods a Chestny ought to have; but since, said she, it was fun to struggle, why complain? And when you had won, as she had won, what fun to look back on the hard times! He could not forgive her that she had enjoyed the struggle and that she thought she had won.

What she meant when she said she had won was that she had brought him up successfully and had sent him to college and that he had turned out so well-good looking (her teeth had gone unfilled so that his could be straightened), intelligent (he realized he was too intelligent to be a success), and with a future ahead of him (there was of course no future ahead of him). She excused his gloominess on the grounds that he was still growing up and his radical ideas on his lack of practical experience. She said he didn't yet know a thing about "life," that he hadn't even entered the real world—when already he was as disenchanted with it as a man of fifty.

The further irony of all this was that in spite of her, he had turned out so well. In spite of going to only a third-rate college, he had, on his own initiative, come out with a first-rate education; in spite of growing up dominated by a small mind, he had ended up with a large one; in spite of all her foolish views, he was free of prejudice and unafraid to face facts. Most miraculous of all, instead of being blinded by love for her as she was for him, he had cut himself emotionally free of her and could see her with complete objectivity. He was not dominated by his mother.

The bus stopped with a sudden jerk and shook him from his meditation. A woman from the back lurched forward with little steps and barely escaped falling in his newspaper as she righted herself. She got off and a large Negro got on. Julian kept his paper lowered to watch. It gave him a certain satisfaction to see injustice in daily operation. It confirmed his view that with a few exceptions there was no one worth knowing within a radius of three hundred miles. The Negro was well dressed and carried a briefcase. He looked around and then sat down on the other end of the seat where the woman with the red and white canvas sandals was sitting. He immediately unfolded a newspaper and obscured himself behind it. Julian's mother's elbow at once prodded insistently into his ribs. "Now you see why I won't ride on these buses by myself," she whispered.

The woman with the red and white canvas sandals had risen at the same time the Negro sat down and had gone farther back in the bus and taken the seat of the woman who had got off. His mother leaned forward and cast her an approving look.

Julian rose, crossed the aisle, and sat down in the place of the woman with the canvas sandals. From this position, he looked serenely across at his mother. Her face had turned an angry red. He stared at her, making his eyes the eyes of a stranger. He felt his tension suddenly lift as if he had openly declared war on her.

He would have liked to get in conversation with the Negro and to talk with him about art or politics or any subject that would be above the comprehension of those around them, but the man remained entrenched behind his paper. He was either ignoring the change of seating or had never noticed it. There was no way for Julian to convey his sympathy.

His mother kept her eyes fixed reproachfully on his face. The woman with the protruding teeth was looking at him avidly as if he were a type of monster new to her.

"Do you have a light?" he asked the Negro.

Without looking away from his paper, the man reached in his pocket and handed him a packet of matches.

"Thanks," Julian said. For a moment he held the matches foolishly. A **NO SMOKING** sign looked down upon him from over the door. This alone would not have deterred him; he had no cigarettes. He had quit smoking some months before because he could not afford it. "Sorry," he muttered and handed back the matches. The Negro lowered the paper and gave him an annoyed

look. He took the matches and raised the paper again.

His mother continued to gaze at him but she did not take advantage of his momentary discomfort. Her eyes retained their battered look. Her face seemed to be unnaturally red, as if her blood pressure had risen. Julian allowed no glimmer of sympathy to show on his face. Having got the advantage, he wanted desperately to keep it and carry it through. He would have liked to teach her a lesson that would last her a while, but there seemed no way to continue the point. The Negro refused to come out from behind his paper.

Julian folded his arms and looked stolidly before him, facing her but as if he did not see her, as if he had ceased to recognize her existence. He visualized a scene in which, the bus having reached their stop, he would remain in his seat and when she said, "Aren't you going to get off?" he would look at her as at a stranger who had rashly addressed him. The corner they got off on was usually deserted, but it was well lighted and it would not hurt her to walk by herself the four blocks to the Y. He decided to wait until the time came and then decide whether or not he would let her get off by herself. He would have to be at the Y at ten to bring her back, but he could leave her wondering if he was going to show up. There was no reason for her to think she could always depend on him.

He retired again into the high-ceilinged room sparsely settled with large pieces of antique furniture. His soul expanded momentarily but then he became aware of his mother across from him and the vision shriveled. He studied her coldly. Her feet in little pumps dangled like a child's and did not quite reach the floor. She was training on him an exaggerated look of reproach. He felt completely detached from her. At that moment he could with pleasure have slapped her as he would have slapped a particularly obnoxious child in his charge.

He began to imagine various unlikely ways by which he could teach her a lesson. He might make friends with some distinguished Negro professor or lawyer and bring him home to spend the evening. He would be entirely justified but her blood pressure would rise to 300. He could not push her to the extent of making her have a stroke, and moreover, he had never been successful at making any Negro friends. He had tried to strike up an acquaintance on the bus with some of the better types, with ones that looked like professors or ministers or lawyers. One morning he had sat down next to a distinguished-looking dark brown man who had answered his questions with a sonorous solemnity but who had turned out to be an undertaker. Another day he had sat down beside a cigar-smoking Negro with a diamond ring on his finger, but after a few stilted pleasantries, the Negro had rung the buzzer and risen, slipping two lottery tickets into Julian's hand as he climbed over him to leave.

He imagined his mother lying desperately ill and his being able to secure only a Negro doctor for her. He toyed with that idea for a few minutes and then dropped it for a momentary vision of himself participating as a sympathizer in a sit-in demonstration. This was possible but he did not linger with it. Instead, he approached the ultimate horror. He brought home a beautiful suspiciously Negroid woman. Prepare yourself, he said. There is nothing you can do about it. This is the woman I've chosen. She's intelligent, dignified, even good, and she's suffered and she hasn't thought it fun. Now persecute us, go ahead and persecute us. Drive her out of here, but remember, you're driving me too. His eyes were narrowed and through the indignation he had generated, he saw his mother across the aisle, purple-faced, shrunken to the dwarf-like proportions of her moral nature, sitting like a mummy beneath the ridiculous banner of her hat.

He was tilted out of his fantasy again as the bus stopped. The door opened with a sucking hiss and out of the dark a large, gaily dressed, sullen-looking colored woman got on with a little boy. The child, who might have been four, had on a short plaid suit and a Tyrolean hat with a blue

feather in it. Julian hoped that he would sit down beside him and that the woman would push in beside his mother. He could think of no better arrangement.

As she waited for her tokens, the woman was surveying the seating possibilities—he hoped with the idea of sitting where she was least wanted. There was something familiar-looking about her but Julian could not place what it was. She was a giant of a woman. Her face was set not only to meet opposition but to seek it out. The downward tilt of her large lower lip was like a warning sign: DON'T TAMPER WITH ME. Her bulging figure was encased in a green crepe dress and her feet overflowed in red shoes. She had on a hideous hat. A purple velvet flap came down on one side of it and stood up on the other; the rest of it was green and looked like a cushion with the stuffing out. She carried a mammoth red pocketbook that bulged throughout as if it were stuffed with rocks.

To Julian's disappointment, the little boy climbed up on the empty seat beside his mother. His mother lumped all children, black and white, into the common category, "cute," and she thought little Negroes were on the whole cuter than little white children. She smiled at the little boy as he climbed on the seat.

Meanwhile the woman was bearing down upon the empty seat beside Julian. To his annoyance, she squeezed herself into it. He saw his mother's face change as the woman settled herself next to him and he realized with satisfaction that this was more objectionable to her than it was to him. Her face seemed almost gray and there was a look of dull recognition in her eyes, as if suddenly she had sickened at some awful confrontation. Julian saw that it was because she and the woman had, in a sense, swapped sons. Though his mother would not realize the symbolic significance of this, she would feel it. His amusement showed plainly on his face.

The woman next to him muttered something unintelligible to herself. He was conscious of a kind of bristling next to him, a muted growling like that of an angry cat. He could not see anything but the red pocketbook upright on the bulging green thighs. He visualized the woman as she had stood waiting for her tokens—the ponderous figure, rising from the red shoes upward over the solid hips, the mammoth bosom, the haughty face, to the green and purple hat.

His eyes widened.

The vision of the two hats, identical, broke upon him with the radiance of a brilliant sunrise. His face was suddenly lit with joy. He could not believe that Fate had thrust upon his mother such a lesson. He gave a loud chuckle so that she would look at him and see that he saw. She turned her eyes on him slowly. The blue in them seemed to have turned a bruised purple. For a moment he had an uncomfortable sense of her innocence, but it lasted only a second before principle rescued him. Justice entitled him to laugh. His grin hardened until it said to her as plainly as if he were saying aloud: Your punishment exactly fits your pettiness. This should teach you a permanent lesson.

Her eyes shifted to the woman. She seemed unable to bear looking at him and to find the woman preferable. He became conscious again of the bristling presence at his side. The woman was rumbling like a volcano about to become active. His mother's mouth began to twitch slightly at one corner. With a sinking heart, he saw incipient signs of recovery on her face and realized that this was going to strike her suddenly as funny and was going to be no lesson at all. She kept her eyes on the woman and an amused smile came over her face as if the woman were a monkey that had stolen her hat. The little Negro was looking up at her with large fascinated eyes. He had been trying to attract her attention for some time.

"Carver!" the woman said suddenly. "Come heah!"

When he saw that the spotlight was on him at last, Carver drew his feet up and turned himself

toward Julian's mother and giggled.

"Carver!" the woman said. "You heah me? Come heah!"

Carver slid down from the seat but remained squatting with his back against the base of it, his head turned slyly around toward Julian's mother, who was smiling at him. The woman reached a hand across the aisle and snatched him to her. He righted himself and hung backwards on her knees, grinning at Julian's mother. "Isn't he cute?" Julian's mother said to the woman with the protruding teeth.

"I reckon he is," the woman said without conviction.

The Negress yanked him upright but he eased out of her grip and shot across the aisle and scrambled, giggling wildly, onto the seat beside his love.

"I think he likes me," Julian's mother said, and smiled at the woman. It was the smile she used when she was being particularly gracious to an inferior. Julian saw everything lost. The lesson had rolled off her like rain on a roof.

The woman stood up and yanked the little boy off the seat as if she were snatching him from contagion. Julian could feel the rage in her at having no weapon like his mother's smile. She gave the child a sharp slap across his leg. He howled once and then thrust his head into her stomach and kicked his fret against her shins. "Be-have," she said vehemently.

The bus stopped and the Negro who had been reading the newspaper got off. The woman moved over and set the little boy down with a thump between herself and Julian. She held him firmly by the knee. In a moment he put his hands in front of his face and peeped at Julian's mother through his fingers.

"I see yooooooooo!" she said and put her hand in front of her face and peeped at him.

The woman slapped his hand down. "Quit yo' foolishness," she said, "before I knock the living Jesus out of you!"

Julian was thankful that the next stop was theirs. He reached up and pulled the cord. The woman reached up and pulled it at the same time. Oh my God, he thought. He had the terrible intuition that when they got off the bus together, his mother would open her purse and give the little boy a nickel. The gesture would be as natural to her as breathing. The bus stopped and the woman got up and lunged to the front, dragging the child, who wished to stay on, after her. [...] His mother got up and followed. As they neared the door, Julian tried to relieve her of her pocketbook.

"No," she murmured, "I want to give the little boy a nickel."

"No!" Julian hissed. "No!"

She smiled down at the child and opened her bag. The bus door opened and the woman picked him up by the arm and descended with him, hanging at her hip. Once in the street she set him down and shook him.

Julian's mother had to close her purse while she got down the bus step but as soon as her feet were on the ground, she opened it again and began to rummage inside. "I can't find but a penny," she whispered, "but it looks like a new one."

"Don't do it!" Julian said fiercely between his teeth. There was a streetlight on the corner and she hurried to get under it so that she could better see into her pocketbook. The woman was heading off rapidly down the street with the child still hanging backward on her hand.

"Oh little boy!" Julian's mother called and took a few quick steps and caught up with them just beyond the lamppost. "Here's a bright new penny for you," and she held out the coin, which shone bronze in the dim light.

The huge woman turned and for a moment stood, her shoulders lifted and her face frozen with

frustrated rage, and stared at Julian's mother. Then all at once she seemed to explode like a piece of machinery that had been given one ounce of pressure too much. Julian saw the black fist swing out with the red pocketbook. He shut his eyes and cringed as he heard the woman shout, "He don't take nobody's pennies!" When he opened his eyes, the woman was disappearing down the street with the little boy staring wide-eyed over her shoulder. Julian's mother was sitting on the sidewalk.

"I told you not to do that," Julian said angrily. "I told you not to do that!"

He stood over her for a minute, gritting his teeth. Her legs were stretched out in front of her and her hat was on her lap. He squatted down and looked her in the face. It was totally expressionless. "You got exactly what you deserved," he said. "Now get up."

He picked up her pocketbook and put what had fallen out back in it. He picked the hat up off her lap. The penny caught his eye on the sidewalk and he picked that up and let it drop before her eyes into the purse. Then he stood up and leaned over and held his hands out to pull her up. She remained immobile. He sighed. Rising above them on either side were black apartment buildings, marked with irregular rectangles of light. At the end of the block a man came out of a door and walked off in the opposite direction. "All right," he said, "suppose somebody happens by and wants to know why you're sitting on the sidewalk?"

She took the hand and, breathing hard, pulled heavily up on it and then stood for a moment, swaying slightly as if the spots of light in the darkness were circling around her. Her eyes, shadowed and confused, finally settled on his face. He did not try to conceal his irritation. "I hope this teaches you a lesson," he said. She leaned forward and her eyes raked his face. She seemed trying to determine his identity. Then, as if she found nothing familiar about him, she started off with a headlong movement in the wrong direction.

"Aren't you going on to the Y?" he asked.

"Home," she muttered.

"Well, are we walking?"

For answer she kept going. Julian followed along, his hands behind him. He saw no reason to let the lesson she had had go without backing it up with an explanation of its meaning. She might as well be made to understand what had happened to her. "Don't think that was just an uppity Negro woman," he said. "That was the whole colored race which will no longer take your condescending pennies. That was your black double. She can wear the same hat as you, and to be sure," he added gratuitously (because he thought it was funny), "it looked better on her than it did on you. What all this means," he said, "is that the old world is gone. The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn." He thought bitterly of the house that had been lost for him. "You aren't who you think you are," he said.

She continued to plow ahead, paying no attention to him. Her hair had come undone on one side. She dropped her pocketbook and took no notice. He stooped and picked it up and handed it to her but she did not take it.

"You needn't act as if the world had come to an end," he aid, "because it hasn't. From now on you've got to live in a new world and face a few realities for a change. Buck up," he said, "it won't kill you."

She was breathing fast.

"Let's wait on the bus," he said.

"Home," she said thickly.

"I hate to see you behave like this," he said. "Just like a child. I should be able to expect more of you." He decided to stop where he was and make her stop and wait for a bus. "I'm not going

any farther," he said, stopping. "We're going on the bus."

She continued to go on as if she had not heard him. He took a few steps and caught her arm and stopped her. He looked into her face and caught his breath. He was looking into a face he had never seen before. "Tell Grandpa to come get me," she said.

He stared, stricken.

"Tell Caroline to come get me," she said.

Stunned, he let her go and she lurched forward again, walking as if one leg were shorter than the other. A tide of darkness seemed to be sweeping her from him. "Mother!" he cried. "Darling, sweetheart, wait!" Crumpling, she fell to the pavement. He dashed forward and fell at her side, crying, "Mamma, Mamma!" He turned her over. Her face was fiercely distorted. One eye, large and staring, moved slightly to the left as if it had become unmoored. The other remained fixed on him, raked his face again, found nothing and closed.

"Wait here, wait here!" he cried and jumped up and began to run for help toward a cluster of lights he saw in the distance ahead of him. "Help, help!" he shouted, but his voice was thin, scarcely a thread of sound. The lights drifted farther away the faster he ran and his feet moved numbly as if they carried him nowhere. The tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow.

## **A prayer for the United States of America and the President-elect**

*Almighty God, all the people of the earth are yours. We are all your children.*

*Your will is done when governments are rightly administered, liberty is preserved, justice is decreed, dignity is assured, and care is extended to the most vulnerable of your children.*

*This day, we ask that you would look with favor on President-elect Donald J. Trump. Protect him and keep his family safe. Grant to him equal doses of courage and humility. Guide him as he makes countless decisions. Give him wisdom and mercy. Enable him to find the right words: good words, true words, healing words.*

*Our country's differences and divisions are vast. Deliver us, loving God, from rancor and cynicism. Forgive our sins. Encourage us to kindness. Teach us to mend the tattered places in this society. Give us hope and holy perspective for the living of these days.*

*Tender Creator, in some ways – important ways – we all want the same things. We want opportunity. We want fairness from our government. We want safety. We want order. We want clean water and fresh air. We want to come home at night, feeling like we are making progress, like we are part of something bigger than ourselves, like we matter. We all want to matter.*

*Give to us all, O Lord, in this time, common purpose and an uncommon commitment to this great country. Help us to work together to achieve a more perfect union – a nation that is more than the sum of its parts.*

*Mold the President-elect into your servant. Help him to lead us in pursuing your extraordinary vision.*

*This we pray in the name of the one who calls all people to reconciling and redemptive work, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*