

The Great Jump-Off

chris wind

[chriswind3@gmail.com](mailto:chriswind3@gmail.com)

[www.chriswind.net](http://www.chriswind.net)

Cast:

Great-grand-za

Jeth, Larah's parent

Larah, a child

Director on tv set/Megaphoned voice

Ayn Randall, host of Face-Off

Carol Sagan, participant in Face-Off

Marion Eplett, participant in Face-Off

crowd voices

Scenes:

1 - Great-grand-za's porch

2 - the set of Face-Off (a television show)

3 - Great-grand-za's porch

4 - a cliff top

5 - Great-grand-za's porch

Scene 1: [Great-grand-za's porch]

[sound of car doors shutting, Jeth and Larah getting out, running/walking up stairs to Great-grand-za's porch]

Great-grand-za: Hey, my little puppy! Come here, let me see you!

Larah: Great-grand-za!

Great-grand-za: How was the drive?

Jeth: Not bad, how are you?

Great-grand-za: The same, 'not bad'.

Larah: Look what I made you!

[rustling of paper]

Great-grand-za: Oh, that's beautiful, thank you Larah! I'm going to put it right here on the porch table and every time I sit out here, I'll see it, okay?

Larah: Okay!

Great-grand-za: I made something for you too!

Larah: You did? What?

[rustling of cookie tin being opened]

Great-grand-za: Chocolate chip cookies!

Larah: Oh--

Jeth: What do you--

Larah: Thank you! May I please have one now?

Great-grand-za: Certainly you may. Would you like a drink to go with it?  
Jeth?

Jeth: Sure--I'll go, stay put.

Great-grand-za: [calling out after him] Bring the photo album too, would you, it's on the kitchen table. Larah wanted to see her gene pool, remember?

[Great-grand-za and Jeth laugh.]

Larah: These are good cookies.

Great-grand-za: They are, aren't they--chocolate chip cookies are my favourite.

Larah: Mine too.

Great-grand-za: I have an idea!

Larah: What?

Great-grand-za: Next time, would you like to help me make them?

Larah: Okay!

[Jeth returns, rustle of drinks being served]

Jeth: Here you go, and you--careful not to spill--and here's the album, za.

Great-grand-za: Ah, let me see here. Larah, want to squeeze in beside me here?

[appropriate sounds]

Great-grand-za: There we go. Okay, let's see--ah, this is your great-grand-uncle.

Larah: What's an uncle?

Jeth: It's a parensib. We used to have different words for men and women parensibs.

Larah: That's silly! Why did you do that?

Jeth: I don't know. I guess some times we did silly things.

Great-grand-za: Hm. And this is your great-grand-aunt, your great-grand-parsib, Carol.

Jeth: Now there's a person you would've liked, Larah.

Larah: Is ze dead now?

Great-grand-za: Yes, she is.

Larah: Was ze your sib?

Great-grand-za: Yes, yes she was. [proudly] My sibling, Carol Sagan. She became famous!

Larah: How did she do that?

Great-grand-za: I don't suppose you've heard of the Great Jump-Off?

Jeth: No, there's one you haven't told us--what was 'The Great Jump-off'?

Larah: Was it a game?

Great-grand-za: No, it was much more serious than a game. Do you know what religion is?

Larah: Is that a game?

Great-grand-za: No, that was definitely not a game. It used to be that a lot of people believed in something they called 'God'. Something they couldn't see or touch--

Larah: Like Santa Claus? Kids used to believe in Santa Claus. They said ze was an old one with a white beard and if you were good you went to the North Pole--no, that's wrong, you got a gift?

Jeth: That's right.

Great-grand-za: Hm, no Easter Bunny either?

Jeth: No--but that's not to say there are no surprises in zeir life. Every now and then ze gets a secret gift. Or gives one.

Great-grand-za: But the magic--

Jeth: There's enough real magic in the world, za. Right now it's fireflies. Two months ago it was prisms. Before that, bubbles.

Larah: So was God like Santa Claus?

Great-grand-za: Yes--actually God was a lot like Santa Claus--a Santa Claus for adults, [in a lower voice] who didn't want to grow up.

Larah: So when did zey all jump off?

Great-grand-za: [laughing] Well-asked! First, there was the 'Face-Off'. That's an old television show your great-grand-aunt appeared on from time to time. It was sort of a one-on-one debate, a discussion, of important ideas and issues.

Scene 2: [the set of Face-Off, a television show]

Director: All quite on the set, please. [pause] Action.

Ayn Randall: Welcome to this week's Face-Off. Today on our show we have Carol Sagan, representing the atheist point of view. Carol teaches at our local university and is a columnist for City Times. Representing the theist point of view, we have Marion Eplett. Marion is a member of The Associated Church, and leader of a good many community projects. Welcome to you both.

Carol and Marion: Thank you.

Ayn: Who would like to open?

Carol: I would, with a question, if I may: Marion, why do you believe in a god as the creator of the universe and not, for instance, a purple platypus?

Marion: [after a bit of a pause, the question has surprised her] Well, because that's ridiculous--believing in a purple platypus doesn't make--

Carol: It doesn't make sense? But belief is independent of reason. What does it matter if it makes sense or not? I can list a thousand things you believe that don't make sense. So again, why don't you believe that The Purple Platypus created the world?

Marion: Well, because it's just not true. God--

Carol: Not true? So you're not talking faith--you're talking knowledge? You know? You can prove God exists then?

Marion: Oh yes! Theologians have been proving God's existence for ages! For example, everything must come from somewhere--

Carol: Who says so?

Marion: Well, logic, I guess--

Carol: Reason?

Marion: Yes, okay, reason--and that's the basis of proof for God's existence. He's the something that created everything.

Carol: And who created God?

Marion: No one. He's omnipotent. He created himself.

Carol: So you suspend the very logic that got you to God in order to explain God: everything has a cause, therefore God--but then suddenly everything doesn't have to have a cause, therefore God!

Marion: Is that a problem?

Carol: It's inconsistent, it's illogical!

Marion: But God is exempt from the paltry human rules of logic. He transcends reason!

Carol: But it's not him that's transcending it, it's you! You're the one who's saying 'now I'll use logic, now I won't'.

Marion: But as I said, and Kierkegaard will back me up on this--it doesn't have to be reasonable.

Carol: Then why not believe in the Purple Platypus instead?

Marion: What?

Carol: Why isn't the Purple Platypus the being that created everything, including itself?

Marion: Well, I suppose God could take the form of a purple platypus--but there's no support for the existence of any purple platypus...

Carol: There is for God's?

Marion: Oh yes, the Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls, relics, first person testimonies--

Carol: The Bible? What about the contradictions in the Bible?

Marion: I beg your pardon?

Carol: Well, how do you decide which stories to believe--when there are two?

Marion: Such as?

Carol: Genesis, for starters. There are two versions about the creation of man and woman. Which do you believe and why?

[pause--Marion doesn't respond.]

Carol: And what about the Apocrypha--all the stories that were decided by somebody at some time or other to be left out. There's one that says God has no gender. Why do you believe the 'He' version instead?

Marion: Well, I'm sure there was good reason--look, I'm not saying there aren't weak spots in my faith. But surely it's better to believe in something than in nothing at all! Are you saying it's better to be pagan?

Carol: That's interesting--you use the word 'pagan' to suggest someone primitive, someone unenlightened. I use the word 'Christian' in the same way. However, you misunderstand. I'm not saying I believe in nothing, I--well maybe I am--I don't need to believe in anything, because I know. I believe,

if you will, in knowledge, in reason.

Marion: But a godless world? I can't imagine--

Carol: I can.

Marion: But don't you see? With no sense of right or wrong--

Carol: I didn't say I don't have a sense of right or wrong. Ethics don't have to depend on a god. Theists don't have a monopoly on morality!

Marion: Well, without God, how would you know what's right and wrong?

Carol: We could determine that!

Marion: On what basis?

Carol: How about justice? 'It's good to treat everyone fairly'. Or how about harmful consequences? 'It's bad to hurt someone.'

Marion: And what's to stop someone from being bad?

Carol: What stops them now, the fear of God's punishment?

Marion: Well--

Carol: Do you mean to say that the only reason you're good is because you want to get to heaven? Isn't that, by your own standards, selfish?

Marion: [after a pause of frustration] Can you sit there and tell me right now what's just?

Carol: No. It's not that black and white. If you want simple answers, go back to your catechism. The world is full of grey complexities--but as intelligent and sensitive adults, I think we can arrive at the answers we need.

Marion: What about Sundays? You'll be taking away family time--don't you believe in the sanctity of the family?

Carol: [after a pause of confusion] But you're forgetting about flextime. Parents can simply choose a workshift that parallels their kids' school shift. But surely that's--

Marion: [gaining strength from what she perceived to be a pause of uncertainty] And are you advocating a world without prayers?

Carol: Prayers?! Yes I'm advocating a world without prayers! It's easy to talk to a god that doesn't talk back. But it's more effective to talk to the people you share life with.

Marion: And what about the children?



Carol: [beginning to be frustrated by these apparently erratic but vehement non sequiturs] What about the children?

Marion: Who will you turn to for guidance in this heathen world of yours?

Carol: To my self--my mind--and to that of others I deem deserving.

Marion: And you deem mere mortals to be more deserving than God?

Carol: Yes, I do. Look at all the remarkable, dare I say miraculous, things we've done. Can you name one feat of God's in the last thousand years that rivals the telephone? the pain killer? the Brandenburg concertos?

Marion: But all the telephones and concertos in the world won't save us.

Carol: And God will? I'll put my money on my mind any time. Maybe not telephones. Maybe a method of re-oxygenating the oceans, maybe a worldwide ban on all weapons, maybe--

[suddenly breaks off, then starts anew, more calmly]

It's your faith versus my reason. My reason tells me that if I jump off a cliff while attached to a hang-glider that is built to a specific design, determined by rational thought, I'll land safely at the bottom. Your faith tells you to trust in God: jump off the same cliff without the glider--He'll save you, right? Because He transcends the knowledge of science, the reason of logic. Am I correct?

Marion: Yes.

Carol: Then let's do it.

Ayn: Uh--

Marion: [interrupting] Okay.

Ayn: I'm afraid we have run out of time. I'd like to thank our guests for this stimulating debate, and let our audience know that next week...[fade out]

Scene 3: [the tv set after the show]

Ayn: Carol, are you crazy? She'll kill herself!

Carol: Yes, I know that. And you know that. She believes differently.

Ayn: Or knows it too and accepts it--you made it hard to refuse.

Carol: I am not responsible for her decision.

Ayn: But your very participation in a stunt like this will be as good as approving it!

Carol: But I do! Or I never would have suggested it. Frankly, I admire anyone with the courage to act according to their convictions. Look Ayn, it's time to stop being polite. It's time to stop smiling, tolerant and faintly amused, as if theists are children with harmless Linus blankets. They're not! There are large numbers of people who believe that any interference in the course of events is to mess with 'The Divine Plan'.

Ayn: But--

Carol: They think anti-nuclear activists and environmentalists are doing the devil's work, for crying out loud! They're for nuclear war because such global devastation fits the Biblical description of the end of the world! It's a good thing religious fanatics don't know their physics very well--we're just lucky there weren't more detonations on the millennial New Year's Eve! Some of these people hold positions of political and economic power. They're dangerous, Ayn.

Look, we can't afford to have half the human race padding around muttering about how unworthy they are, 'waiting for Godot' to save them. And our silence just allows their cult of inferiority and impotence to flourish. We are on the brink of extinction: we need everything we are, everything we can be, to get us through.

Scene 4: [great-grand-za's porch]

Jeth: So did it happen? [fascinated and horrified at the same time] Did they have 'The Great Jump-off'?

Great-grand-za: Well, a lot of people were against it, theists and atheists alike. Many, like Ayn, thought it was a bit drastic. And some said it was just plain stupid. The theists cried out 'Who are we to presume, to demand that God prove Himself how and when and where we want--God doesn't need proof.' But then Carol cried back, 'Then neither does The Purple Platypus, and it's His will that all theists die.' [chuckling] That really threw them for a loop. And some tried to accuse her--'those who need proof are weak in spirit'; 'but strong in mind' she answered.

[after a pause] Yes. They had 'The Great Jump-Off'. Carol and Marion. Then Carol and Bob. Then Ayn and--well, you get the picture.

Scene 5: [a cliff top]

[crowd buzzings, random calls, etc.]

[inaudible media query]

Ayn: [fading in, half-shouting a response to media question] No, we're not part of any group per se, we're here as individuals.

[background noises of equipment fastenings]

Carol: [good naturedly] A little ironic, the interviewer-extraordinaire now being hounded by the media--for an interview!

Ayn: Hey I don't regret being fired one bit--if the network couldn't handle the fact of my support--

Carol: --your voca support--

Ayn: Well, you were right. I did some research. Religious tolerance is, has become, dangerous. Perhaps more dangerous than religious belief.

Carol: But Face-Off has really taken off in the ratings, because of you, and now you--

Ayn: --and now I'm with you. Speaking of which, how are you?

[inaudible media query]

Ayn: [again half-shouting in response] We know that it's better to act according to reason than according to faith. Knowledge, not belief, is the way out of our tailspin.

Carol: Oh, good choice of words. [pause] I'm fine.

[yet another media query]

Ayn: [becoming a little impatient] Yes, that's true. And we agree with you. But we're past the naivete of the independent: what people do or do not do on their own does affect the people next door--even if they're not in positions of political or economic power. 'It's none of your business' is almost always a lie now.

[fade out and in, as if microphone is moved from Ayn to somewhere else on the cliff top, to sounds of a group of people praying]

Marion: Dear God, help me in this, my hour of need. As you have before, so I believe You shall again. I place my fear in Your hands, Almighty God. I come to you, Our Father, as Your loving and dutiful child. I trust Your guidance. Your will shall be done. [fading out, with group] Hail Mary, Mother of God, pray for me, a sinner. By the powers of your intercession, grant me...

Megaphoned voice: Ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention. I believe we're ready...

Scene 6: [great-grand-za's porch]

Jeth: Wow. It really happened? I mean, they both jumped off--

Great-grand-za: Yes.

Jeth: And what about Marion. I mean--

Great-grand-za: For some, Marion's death didn't change a thing. She became a martyr: 'The Lord works in wondrous ways', 'We don't always understand...', 'We must accept...', 'He knows best'. Or she became an unfortunate: 'Her faith wasn't strong enough', 'God punished her for the sin of pride'. And so another would try; and another. All ignoring the Catch 22: how can you believe that you've been 'chosen', that your faith is strong enough, and at the same time maintain humility?

But for others, Marion's death did make a difference. It became painfully clear to them what a scurry of arse-covering they had done. They became angry at the spot they were put in--by Carol, by God--by reason, by belief.

Jeth: And did it make a difference--overall, I mean?

Great-grand-za: Who really knows? People changed--but it could've been for a number of reasons. Things got worse--much worse--you've probably studied the food, water, and oxygen rationing in history class.

Jeth: Yeah--it's incredible--that people let it go so far.

Great-grand-za: Hm. [pause] See that it doesn't happen again, eh?

Larah: Did anyone still believe in their Santa Claus after that?

Great-grand-za: Yes, some did. Many didn't. Overall, people became less accepting, less passive. I don't know, it seems there was less apathy, less lethargy. They stopped waiting for something to happen, they stopped thinking that they'd wake up one day and everything would be better, I guess. They stopped trusting in whatever it was they had trusted in to make it better.

I suppose that could have been the result of a loss of faith: when there is no Divine Plan, when there is no God whose will will be done, then I guess people figure out pretty quick you have to make your own plan, carry out your own will. If you ask me, I always thought 'God's will be done' was just a high and mighty que sera sera, it was plain and simple passing the buck.

Along with that came a crushing sense of responsibility. For the past, the present, and the future. Everyone knew it was our fault; we were to blame--not some god, not some devil. And since there wasn't going to be any knight in shining armour to come rescue us, well--there was a lot more co-operation, it seems to me, after the Great Jump-Off--co-operation with each other to find a way out--

Jeth: I wonder if the concept of an afterlife had anything to do with it. I mean, theists believe there's something better after this life, don't they? Or a second chance?

Great-grand-za: You may have a point. It may well change what you do when you know this is it.