

The Great Jump-Off

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Cast:

Great-grand-za

Jeth, Larah's parent

Larah, a child

Carol Broderick, participant in Face-Off

Marion Eplett, participant in Face-Off

crowd

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]

Larah: Great-grand-za!

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

[They snuggle.]

Great-grand-za [to Jeth]: How was the drive?

Jeth: Not bad. How are you?

Great-grand-za: The same. Not bad.

Larah: Look what I made you!

[She shows him some sculpturish work of art.]

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?

[He opens the tin already sitting on the table.]

Great-grand-za: Chocolate chip cookies!

[Larah starts to reach into the tin.]

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?

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 with drinks for all and the album.]

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?

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 Broderick. 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, that's one you haven't told us--what was 'The Great Jump-off'?

Larah: Was it a game?

Great-grand-za: Oh 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 zer 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; Carol and Marion are engaged in a debate which is already underway]

Carol: Marion, let me ask you this then: 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 God who'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. Morality doesn't have to depend on a god.

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 wrong 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. 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] Well, there's Saturdays. And evenings. And in any case, 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 of your trust 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 light bulb?

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

Carol: And God will? I'll put my money on my mind any time. Maybe not telephones or light bulbs, but a way to cool the planet, better distribution of food and water, an international ban on nuclear weapons--

[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.

Marion: [after a moment] Okay.

Scene 3: [great-grand-za's porch; Larah is asleep in Jeth's arms]

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

Great-grand-za: Well, many people thought it was a bit drastic. They criticized Carol for putting Marion on the spot. But Carol insisted she hadn't forced Marion to agree. She also said she actually admired Marion for having the courage to act according to her convictions.

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.

The atheists said it was time to stop being polite, time to stop smiling, tolerant and faintly amused, as if theists were children with harmless Linus blankets. On the contrary, they said, many theists believed that any interference in the course of events was to mess with 'The Divine Plan', that anti-nuclear activists and environmentalists were doing the devil's work! Some were even trying to bring about global devastation because it fit the Biblical description of the end of the world and thus proved their belief in God was correct. And some of those, Carol pointed out, were in positions of great political and economic power. They were, in a word, dangerous. And, Carol said, and this was quoted quite a bit, 'Religious tolerance is as dangerous as religious belief.'

Jeth: I can see that. I'm glad we got 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.

Great-grand-za: [nodding] So, yes. They had 'The Great Jump-Off'. Carol and Marion. Then Carol and Bob. Then Ann and---well, you get the picture.

Jeth: Wow. And what did the theists say. I mean after Marion--

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'd been put in--by Carol, by God--by reason, by belief.

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

Great-grand-za: Maybe. People did become less accepting, less passive. 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 quickly that 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: [nods] Yes, I imagine it would change what you do when you know this is it, this is the only chance you've got.

[Larah murmurs in her sleep.]

Great-grand-za: But who really knows? People could've changed 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. [He looks fondly at Larah.] See that it doesn't happen again, eh?

Jeth nods.