

IF YOU CAN'T BEAT EM, JOIN EM

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FADE IN ON:

EXT. PLAYGROUND - DAY

Howls of angry pain fill the air. Eyes wide from adrenaline, COLIN (7) runs towards the sounds, full speed.

Ducks under playground obstacles every few feet. Under monkey bars. Across a see saw. Uses a Merry Go Round to sling-shot.

Into a mob of excited KIDS. Colin shoulders past several. In the center, he finds:

A bruised and bleeding ROGER (7).

BRAD (7, designer clothes, even at his age) pummels Roger in the face. The flurry of punches just won't stop.

BULKY SIMON (6) slips behind Roger as the boy rocks back.

Pulls him down by his shoulders. THUNK.

Some kids cheer. This fight is getting good. Desperate, Colin dives between his fallen friend, and Brad's fists.

COLIN

Two on one. That's not fair!

BRAD

You're here. It so is!

Eyes narrowed to slits, Brad aims a shot at Colin's nose.

ROGER

Colin - watch out!

Colin feints, kicks Brad in the balls. The boy emits an almost ultra-sonic squeal, and goes down!

The crowd gasps. Simon dives on Colin as revenge.

Still in the dirt, Roger grabs Simon's leg. The chubby bruiser trips... and topples into Colin.

The two go down, a tangle of limbs. A ground fight's inevitable.

Until adult hands pierce the wall of screaming kids. Latching onto collars, unseen adults pull the combatants apart.

BRAD

(points at Colin)

He kicked me. Everyone saw!

COLIN

Only 'cause Brad tried to punch me
in the nose!

BRAD

Colin's a Dirty Fighter. His
friend's a dirty sinner, too!

Brad sneers, hawks a loogie in Colin's face...

INT. PRINCIPALS' OFFICE - LATER

As quiet as a library.

Now in chairs, the four boys face a massive desk. SCHOOL
MONITOR DERRICK (40s) stands between the two "factions":

Simon and Brad on the left.

Colin and Roger on the right. A black eye shadows Roger's
face. A Spiderman bandaid perks up Colin's cheek.

Behind the desk, PRINCIPAL MORRIS (50s) glowers. With graying
hair and weather face, he's authority personified.

Though the floppy plastic ruler he points at the boys takes
away *some* edge.

PRINCIPAL MORRIS

I will *not* abide fighting in my
school. You four better level with
me. Who really started it? And
don't you dare lie. Remember, we
see all. School monitor Derrick's
gathered witness reports.

Simon's hand shoots up first, as if in class.

SIMON

Oooh, oooh! Roger pushed Brad
first. I only jumped in to help.

PRINCIPAL MORRIS

Roger, is that true?

ROGER

I pushed him, but...

PRINCIPAL MORRIS

A mere yes or no will suffice.

ROGER

It was only to keep Brad offa me!

BRAD

Cause you wouldn't shut up. Duh!

PM squints through his glasses; a magisterial look.

PRINCIPAL MORRIS

Roger, what exactly did you say to Brad to make him so upset?

Roger fidgets, stares at the floor.

ROGER

I told him God was, uh... stupid.

Shocked, Derrick gulps.

PRINCIPAL MORRIS

That was the word used: "stupid"?

ROGER

Yeah. And I was right!

PRINCIPAL MORRIS

Roger, you'd best elaborate. God, of all beings, is "stupid"? Why?

ROGER

Uh, because it doesn't make any sense! God's supposed to be the most powerful, awesomest thing in the universe. If that's true - then who made him?

PRINCIPAL MORRIS

(chuckles)

That's a good question. But with a good answer. God's truth is far more complex!

Morris leans forward, his voice comforting and warm.

PRINCIPAL MORRIS

Think of it this way, boy. What else but God would have the power to create everything in the whole, wide world? And when I say everything, I mean the whole shebang. You and me. The trees. The sky.

ROGER

But then God -

PRINCIPAL MORRIS
Has always existed. Case closed.

Roger pouts. Mentally chews on the concept. Colin shoots him a don't-go-there look.

COLIN
Shhh. Not now!

Unable to let it go, Roger raises his arm, too.

ROGER
Then what about bad things in the world? Diseases like leukemia. Parasites? Crocodiles?

PRINCIPAL MORRIS
They're part of God's plan. And the Devil's work.

ROGER
But, if God is all powerful, why does he need a plan at all? And if he created everything, that includes the Devil, too.

PRINCIPAL MORRIS
Young man, this has gone far enough!

Morris whacks the ruler on the desk. All four kids (and Derrick) jump. Brad pipes up.

BRAD
Principal Morris, what Roger said before was even worse! He told Angela there's no heaven, and made her cry. *Someone* had to make him stop!

Principal Morris groans. Pointing at each child with the ever-more-wobbly ruler, he sums his verdict up:

PRINCIPAL MORRIS
Here's what I'm hearing. Correct me if I get details wrong.
(points at Colin)
You jumped in to protect your friend, Roger. An admirable impulse, boy. But you weren't there to see how everything starts.

COLIN
But Brad always -

PRINCIPAL MORRIS

(points at Simon next)

You got involved after Roger pushed Brad, right? In other words, the same motive as Colin. Though you witnessed the initial incident with your own eyes.

SIMON

That means I'm "administrable" too?

PRINCIPAL MORRIS

(points at Brad)

And you acted to protect Angela's feelings. Chivalrous. Good boy.

Morris glowers at Roger. The boy shrinks in his chair.

PRINCIPAL MORRIS

As for you... I have it on good word that this isn't the first infraction you've committed of this kind. According to your homeroom teacher, you say offensive things and start fights regularly.

ROGER

I'm just asking questions. It's not 'cause I wanna start a fight!

PRINCIPAL MORRIS

Yet you know quite well how disruptive such "questions" are. Don't you care about anything except yourself, boy?

ROGER

I care about truth. Doesn't that count?

PRINCIPAL MORRIS

Enough!

He waves to Derrick, annoyed.

PRINCIPAL MORRIS

Derrick, kindly call Roger's family, and inform them we're sending him home. It's an administrative leave of absence. Suspension from school for a month.

(to Colin)

As for you... I'll let you slide with just one day off.

Now, I don't blame you for trying to help a friend. But next time, think before you leap. Or punch.

COLIN

But - what about Brad and Simon?

PRINCIPAL MORRIS

You think I forgot about them? Of course not! Derrick, please escort those two back to class. Protecting the peace and Angela's feelings: they deserve a hero's welcome if you ask me!

Morris shoos Colin and Roger towards the exit. The boys shuffle towards the door, cowed.

ROGER

Wanna walk with me, Colin?

Brad snickers, and sticks his tongue out at them while Principal Morris isn't looking.

COLIN

Sure. I got nowhere else to go.

EXT. SUBURBAN SIDEWALK - MOMENTS LATER

Roger and Colin trudge along, not so eager to reach home.

COLIN

Mom's gonna kill me - good!

ROGER

You only got one day off. Big whoop! At least you slowed Simon down. He woulda beaten me to a pulp!

COLIN

Why'd ya bring God stuff up, anyhow? You know Brad's Dad's a minister.

ROGER

I thought Christians weren't 'suposed to beat people up.

COLIN

They can sometimes. When God says they should.

ROGER

That invisible guy no-one hears but them?

Roger points at Colin's Spiderman bandaid and frowns.

ROGER

I see Spiderman more than God. But no-one thinks he's real. Why not?

COLIN

Don't talk like that at school! If you do, School Monitor Derrick might beat you up too!

Colin kicks a pebble down the road. Follows after it, shoulders slumped.

ROGER

But you agree with me. Don't you?

COLIN

Yeah. But you heard Principal Morris. One more "incident", and you'll get kicked clean outta school. We gotta get smart and keep some stuff real private.

ROGER

Until we graduate?

He counts on his fingers.

ROGER

Through high school n' stuff? That's too long!

COLIN

Later, when we're adults -

ROGER

But Principal Morris and Derrick believe in God. Even though they're super, major old. And people listen to them - 'cause they're in charge!

COLIN

Brad's Dad especially. He's the most powerful guy in town.

ROGER

(beat)

It's never gonna be over. Is it?

COLIN

Dunno. But for now, let's keep it on the down low. We'll only talk to people one-on-one... if they understand.

ROGER

How're we gonna know who's who?

COLIN

Uh, we could create a secret hand sign? You know, like some superheroes do?

He experiments with gestures. Some subtle. Others crude. The two eventually settle on a finger-wiggly motion.

ROGER

(grins)

I like it! But where we gonna use it?

COLIN

In class and church. Where else?

START MONTAGE

Snapshots of life, though with no sound -

- In the playground: Roger chats with ANGELA (7). He mimics the idea of God watching from on-high, using BARBIE DOLLS. Angela looks puzzled. Roger dramatically throws "God" out.

- In Church: BRAD SENIOR (40s) preaches from his pulpit, a prim and proper Brad at his side. A few rows back, Colin and Roger flash the "wiggly" sign to each other. Roger pulls a CHOIR BOY aside.

END MONTAGE

INT. COFFEE HOUSE - DAY

SUPER: Ten years later

A huddle of students slug down espressos at a table. TEEN ROGER and TEEN COLIN flash the wiggle sign. In this clique, they clearly lead.

Roger flashes a BIBLE at the group.

ROGER

And that's the plan. We slip pamphlets between the pages, and plant these in every church in town. There'll be an email address at the end. One that people can contact if/when they want to learn more.

COLIN

Turnabout is fair play. It's the same idea as Chic books... but with the truth this time!

ROGER

We can't expect, uh, miracles.

COLIN

But we'll get some converts. Our ranks will grow!

EXT. COFFEE HOUSE

"Wiggling" a sign off to his friends, Roger hands another Bible to Colin. The two head out the door.

ROGER

(to Colin)

I'm thinking we test-run at Brad's church to start.

COLIN

That'd be poetic justice. Sure!

He grins at the bible in his hands.

COLIN

Funny. You'd think this would burn.

SCREEEEEECH. The two stop short.

In the parking lot, TEEN BRAD and TEEN SIMON wait, arms crossed. Simon's blossomed into a steroid chomping bruiser, with a baseball bat.

A van plastered with religious bumper stickers purrs behind them. An army of righteous THUGS back them up.

ROGER

Uh, Brad... kinda surprised to see you here. Did you miss Saturday Prayer Circle class?

BRAD

When I heard the Church of Sinners
was in session, I took a rain
check. Duh. You may be surprised,
but I'm not. Like Dad says, coffee
is Satan's fuel!

Simon snorts approval at the metaphor.

SIMON

We've come to bust you and your
Blasphemer Buddies up!

BRAD

A job we shoulda finished years
ago.

He stalks towards Roger, eyes narrowed to slits once more.
Just like years ago, Colin dives between Roger and his foe.

BRAD

Let's hope you've learned to pray.
'Cause this time, Derrick's not
gonna be a guardian angel to stop
me from bashing your teeth in!

COLIN

Uh, who needs Derrick? I got God on
my side!

Colin hastily holds up the bible.

COLIN

Behold!

BRAD

You stole that. Give it back!

He grabs for Colin's bible. Colin Matrix-dodges. Roger holds
his up.

BRAD

What the Hell? You got one, too?

Simon's eyes bug out at the unexpected blasphemy.

SIMON

Shhhh. Brad, you just said the "H"
word!

Roger and Colin exchange looks. Hmmm, a vulnerability?

ROGER
Even worse, he's threatening a
fellow Christian!

BRAD
You a Christian? That's a fucking
joke!

Simon gasps again. Scandalized, he inches away from his pal.

ROGER
Language, Brad! What if your
girlfriend Angela hears you cursed?

Brad turns seven deadly shades of red.

BRAD
That's still way better than being
a dirty atheist!

ROGER
That's just the point. We're not!

On the sly, he flashes the "wiggly" sign to Colin.

COLIN
Uh, yeah. Roger's right. In fact,
we were just on our way to relay
the good news ourselves!

ROGER
Which is?

COLIN
(thinks quick)
Which is, uh, we've seen the light!

The two friends nod to each other, scramble to get improvised
stories in sync.

ROGER
Not only that...

COLIN
Roger, wait! There's more?

ROGER
Yes. We've decided to become
priests ourselves. After all, what
better a messenger of forgiveness
than those who have fallen, yet
thanks to the glory of God rise up!

The goons behind Brad grumble. Brad stammers: how to respond?

BRAD

Oh yeah?

ROGER

A heck and holy certainty. From
your lips to God's ears!

BRAD

Then prove it.

COLIN

Why ask for evidence, when one has
Faith?

BRAD

Nuh-uh! Come to Saturday Prayer
Circle with us now. Unless...
you're really bluffing?

ROGER

You kidding? I'm game to spread the
gospel. That's what we live for.
Let's go!

Roger pulls Collin forward, free from earshot of the others.

COLIN

Uh, what's the game plan here?

ROGER

Admit it: we've maximize the number
of outside converts. This isn't a
playground anymore. And you saw the
size Simon's baseball bat. Next
time, he'll have gun. This is war.

COLIN

So you wanna walk into the enemy's
stronghold, unarmed.

ROGER

No. Armed like a sniper. With our
wits.

COLIN

Enough with the battle metaphors.

ROGER

You kidding? I'm just warming up.
Tonight we infiltrate the religious
fortress. As undercover spies!

Despite himself, Colin grins.

COLIN

I get it. If you can't beat 'em,
join 'em.

ROGER

Exactly. And once we're the ones in
charge, folks like Simon'll *have* to
listen to us. Who knows how far
that strategy can go?

Roger strides toward the van. He and Colin jump in.

START MONTAGE

More MOS time flies by.

- In church: Roger and Colin accept Communion in a Prayer
Circle.

- The two friends study in a packed Sunday School class. For
a moment, Roger looks up at TEEN ANGELA, and makes the sign
of the cross. She blushes, then smiles.

- Brad's father introduces a modest Roger to his flock. Roger
preaches passionately. Ignored, Brad glowers from a pew.

- Now older and sporting collars, Roger and Collin teach a
class... which includes several FRIENDS from the Coffee Crew.
Roger flashes the "wiggle" sign to two acolytes in back.

A clock revolves super fast. Like in movies, calendar pages
fly by. Until time returns to normal pace.

END MONTAGE

INT. VATICAN - DAY

Pious luxury everywhere.

POPE ROGER (now 40s) rests in a gilded chair, and reads from
a list of names.

On his right, CARDINAL COLIN checks off locations on a map.

POPE ROGER

Archbishops successfully installed
in India, Romania, Ukraine?

CARDINAL COLIN

Check. Double check, too. How about
the Patriarchs?

POPE ROGER

Those we covered long ago. Coptic,
Melkite, Maronite, Syriac.
Armenian.

CARDINAL COLIN

You forgot Chaldean.

POPE ROGER

Not after last week. We got that,
too.

CARDINAL COLIN

As for the Bishops?

POPE ROGER

They're all our guys. The only
speed bump's the Vicars. Some of
them are still a mixed bag. But
we've got the majority, and that's
enough.

CARDINAL COLIN

Which means: "Operation Pull the
Rug" is finally Go?

POPE ROGER

Finally. After allllll this time.

The two old friends share weary smiles. Standing up, Roger
crosses to a mirror, rubs his eyes.

POPE ROGER

Just LOOK at me!

CARDINAL COLIN

Pretty gaudy, I know. But the
uniform comes with the job.

POPE ROGER

You know what I see when I look in
this mirror?

CARDINAL COLIN

Call me crazy, but: The Pope?

POPE ROGER

Worse than that: decades of wasted
potential. Remember when we were
just boys in school, thinking about
what we to do when we grew up? I
wanted to be comic book writer, for
Christ sake!

CARDINAL COLIN

(chuckles)

Language, Roger.

(softer)

Yes, I remember. Well.

POPE ROGER

But did that happen?

CARDINAL COLIN

No.

POPE ROGER

Instead, we diverted the entire course of both our lives. Building and vast and secret movement, we've clawed our way to the very pinnacle of ideological power. And for what?

CARDINAL COLIN

To free the world from...

(waves)

All this. Was it really worth the sacrifice?

POPE ROGER

(groans)

Except for all dates I've missed. I guess.

Slowly, Roger shuffles to a window. Whipping open the curtains, he reveals:

EXT. VATICAN

A massive, waiting faithful crowd. Spotting Roger, the throngs cheer.

Roger bows. Flashes a "wiggly" sign to Colin behind his back.

Taps a microphone, clears his throat.

POPE ROGER

Is this on? Good. Oh faithful followers, I bring you amazing tidings! God -

Collins gulps and crosses his fingers. Good luck.

POPE ROGER

...despite news to the contrary, does not exist.

The crowd gasps. Pope Roger forges on.

POPE ROGER

At least, not the way you've been told throughout millennia. Make no mistake, *human* holiness exists everywhere. Fragments of precious life, imagination too - in the heart of every one of you. Young and old. From Christian, to Hindu, Atheist. Religious belief itself means nothing.

The crowd fidgets. They're confused.

POPE ROGER

Now, I know just what you're thinking. Perhaps this is a test of faith, or a joke! But time to lay it on the line. Religion - well - best to view that as training wheels on a bike. The bike of all mankind. But now that civilization has its balance, it's time to step away from sweet, false fairytales of that sort. Buy that ten speed and take the training wheels off. As Pope, I'm the supreme authority of all things spiritual. So you *must* trust me when I tell you God not only is dead, "he" never lived. Heaven and hell aren't real, either, and supernatural punishment should not be feared. Choose your morality wisely - but by yourself. Don't believe me? Then ask your Archbishops and Patriarchs. They'll confirm it's all true!

The crowd falls silent, stunned. Roger looks over the crowd, prepares for the coup de grace.

INT. BRAD'S TRAILER HOME

MIDDLE-AGED BRAD lounges on a couch, watches TV. Wearing a t-shirt which reads "Jesus Saves", he munches popcorn.

From the screen, Pope Roger's concluding words project:

POPE ROGER (O.S.)

Today is the day I as Pope forever
release you from religious chains.

Break from the myths I have
revealed. And walk forward to live
life!

Brad chokes on popcorn.

Rushing in from a nearby room, MIDDLE-AGED SIMON performs
emergency Heimlich.

After a few thrusts, Brad might have a broken rib or two -
but breathes fine.

BRAD

Did you hear what that bastard
Roger said?

SIMON

Brad, you can't call the *Pope* a
bastard. That's wrong.

BRAD

"Pope", my ass cheeks! He declared -

ON TV

An excited REPORTER babbles.

REPORTER

You heard it all here first, folks.
All across the globe, nations are
reacting to the shocking
declaration by the Pope that God is
dead. Or at least.. Not here.
Despite initial rumors the Pope may
have had a... delusional episode,
or crisis of faith, that appears to
not be the case. Following the
announcement, every significant
Christian leader we've contacted
for comment - except at the most
local levels - have confirmed: the
whole foundation of
institutionalized religion has been
nothing but an elaborate ruse!

Simon cheers.

SIMON

No more church? I get to sleep late
on Sunday. Awesome!!

Brad glares at Simon.

BRAD

Judas! You're falling for this,
too?

SIMON

You bet your Virgin Mary. I heard
it right from the Pope!

Ripping off a cross necklace, Simon storms towards the
trailer's screen door.

SIMON

Brad, I mean - thanks for givin' me
a place to bunk all these years.
Since Angela left, it's been kinda
fun. Quiet, too. But when the Pope
says sumptin, we gotta listen. Have
a good life n' all - but I ain't
gonna be your bodyguard no more.

With that, Simon's gone. And Brad's alone.

On TV, the reporter rambles on.

REPORTER

Breaking News: according to a Press
Release by Cardinal Colin the
First, the Pope has signed over all
legal ownership of Church assets to
homeless charities and child
leukemia research. When pressed
regarding *his* future plans, the
Pope stated he would be retiring
from public life immediately. "To
write comic books", he told this
reporter.

(chuckles)

If you can believe that. Weird!

Brad throws a bible at the TV, breaks the screen.

BRAD

Jesus Christ!

Outside, happy voices fill the air. The start of a new
spiritual freedom - already spreading far and wide.

FINAL FADE OUT: