

# Jesus Looks Like Pete Yorn

By,

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Genre:

Religious/Spiritual

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The first time I notice the resemblance is at rehearsal one night. We're all on stage blocking the crucifixion and Jesus is on the floor waiting to be nailed to the cross. He looks scared, although he may just be acting. I'm not sure. We aren't running the scene yet, just figuring out where everyone should stand.

It's the first time I really feel comfortable staring at Jesus, whose real name is Justin, because it occurs to me that staring in this particular scene is consistent with my character. I play a marketplace woman. In just about every scene, I'm "background"—literally a face in the first century crowd. Also, I know I can stare because his girlfriend, who happens to be the assistant director, probably can't see me from where she is sitting down in the empty theatre seats.

Justin is thin and wiry. He's wearing jeans, a navy blue hoody with a white tee underneath, and a frayed knit cap. His arms are outstretched and he's looking up at us nervously through a tangle of dark curls that have come loose from his cap. He looks more J. Crew than Jesus, but then there are still two weeks to go before dress rehearsals.

There are thirteen of us in the ensemble cast—an assortment of merchants, zealots, street rats, prostitutes, and townspeople of all ages. It's when we're all standing over Him, practicing our wailing and weeping, that I start to realize that Jesus looks a lot like the musician Pete Dinklage. It may be because for the past few weeks Justin has been letting his beard grow in and his hair is longer and more disheveled, giving him that rumpled rock star look. Or it may be that Justin, delivering his emotional lines, somehow sounds like Pete Dinklage. Either way, there's an undeniable similarity.

At work I start downloading images of Pete Dinklage—just to compare to my mental snapshot of Jesus/Justin—but his features are hard to discern because all of the images I find are small and artfully blurred. I could look at an actual album cover but my copy of Pete Dinklage's debut album is bootlegged, so I don't have the liner notes.

I learn from all my Internet searching that Pete Dinklage has a new album coming out and I think I'll buy that one just so I can look at the liner notes. In the meantime, I order tickets online to see Pete Dinklage live at the Warfield. San Francisco is Pete's first stop on his tour to promote the new album, and even though he lives in L.A. now, even though he's originally from New Jersey, he's coming here first, the day after the Easter play wraps, the day his new album is released, and I don't think any of this is coincidence. In fact, I start to think of it as some sort of spiritual reward for sticking it out through weeks, if not months, of rehearsals for this play, a retelling of The Passion of Christ, a production in which for unknown reasons I find myself involved.

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I do a lot of complaining about rehearsals. They're almost every night now, five times a week, sometimes four hours or more. I come straight from work to rehearsal, then from rehearsal to bed. I do a lot of waiting around, chatting with my fellow cast members, whom I have come to refer to as "the church people." I do a lot of really bad improvisational acting, but no one seems to notice so I figure it doesn't matter.

When I complain to my friends about the schedule, which has meant having to turn down a lot of social invitations, they ask me why I don't just quit. They want to know why I decided to audition for this play, and why—or when—I ever started going to church in the first place. They ask me repeatedly if everything is OK. I start to wonder, in a Clinton-esque way, about the meaning of the word "okay."

You know, the church you go to is e-van-gel-i-cal, my friend Bryant informs me one day, pronouncing every syllable like he thinks I've never heard the word before. It says so right on their web site, he says. Bryant claims to be Buddhist himself, although as far as I know he doesn't practice meditation, and I've never heard him talk about reincarnation or meditation or the Dalai Lama. So I suspect that for him—a man who irons his shirts for work and has more pairs of shoes than I do—this claim is more fashion than religious statement.

The truth is, even I don't know why I started going to church. I pretty much walked into this one by random circumstance. One Sunday I was having coffee with my friend Beth, who I hadn't seen in a while, and she told me she had to leave in 10 minutes to make the mid-morning service at her church. So I just went along with her.

Now I find myself in this play, the church's annual Easter production, and I feel a little outside of myself, like it's not really me who has started attending service every Sunday, holding the hands of my fellow cast members in prayer nightly, donning first century garb and gazing adoringly at Christ who is really Justin who looks like Pete Yorn. I can say in all honesty that I really don't know who I am any more, but when you get right down to it, did I ever know?

Jesus is very hot right now, my LA friend Susan tells me. Mel Gibson has made a movie about The Passion that I have yet to see and I wonder if my character, a linen merchant, has a part in this Hollywood mega-budget production. I wonder who, if anyone, plays me.

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The director calls us all together and tells us how wonderful we're doing, that the play is really coming along. Tonight we're rehearsing the scene where Mary Magdalene is about to be stoned for being an evil temptress before Jesus stops

us, the ensemble cast of townspeople. We're a very judgmental lot, and everyone gets really into their roles. The director doesn't tell any of us individually what to do, only that we're to grab stones out of a basket and circle Mary in an angry mob. We have her essentially pinned to the wall and she is convincing in her efforts to get away from us. I'm glad I'm not Mary, even though she spends a lot of time with Jesus. I could never scream like that, and I notice that she's already collected a few scrapes and bruises on her shins from rehearsing this scene so many times.

I talk to the pastor when we break for dinner and I'm surprised that he knows my name. It's not like we've ever been formally introduced. But I tell him how much I liked what he had to say in service last Sunday, about how his saying growth has to be pursued with purpose and intent really stuck with me. He seems genuinely flattered.

As everyone is eating I strike up a conversation with the town drunk, a fellow ensemble cast member. We talk about our jobs, what other plays we've been in (he's been acting in community theatre for six years; I was once in a Christmas play in the 5th grade) and then he asks me how long I've been "saved." Saved? I'm not saved, I tell him. No one can save me but me. Wow, he says, nodding. I get up to toss my paper plate.

Later that night rehearsal is cut short because one of the principal actors gets injured. During one of the play's few comic scenes she is hit hard in the face with a copper bowl. At first there's the suspicion that she is faking anything more serious than a small cut at the corner of her eye, that her wooziness and apparent disorientation are ploys for sympathy or perhaps a way of protesting the relentless rehearsal schedule. But then the director and producers surround the actor in a protective circle and before long the paramedics are called. We're told to go home early.

The next few rehearsals are cancelled and I have nothing to do. Everyone I know is away for the weekend, making the most of the spring's last big snow storm. My skis sit in the garage, still in the same plastic casing they came in. I can't remember when I ever decided when I needed skis.

I walk home from meeting a friend at a bar in the Mission one Saturday feeling spiritually empty. It's cold and damp and quiet out, and I don't even break my stride when the homeless people huddled in their sleeping bags ask me for money as I pass by. I exhale deeply and look up into the clouded night sky. I attempt a prayer of my own, in my head, but my thinking is too fragmented and I'm sure I'm doing it all wrong. I finally just squeeze my eyes shut and half whisper, "I'm listening."

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The next afternoon I find a hit of Ecstasy in my closet. When I find it I remember that my friend Jordan gave it to me last fall at his Oktoberfest party. I had planned to save it for New Year's Eve, but then had forgotten all about it. When I find it it's wrapped in a piece of Saran Wrap, tucked away in the bottom of a handbag which I almost never carry.

It's Sunday, around 4:00, and I've so little to do that I'm actually sorting my clothes into piles to take to Crossroads or Goodwill. So I don't even hesitate before swallowing the tiny pink pill I've just unwrapped. I lie down on my bed and wait for something to happen, looking absently out the window at the small strip of yard I'd planted the previous summer. Before long the leaves start to look greener, and I notice a single purple flower on a small tree that I'd taken for dead a few weeks before. The soil glistens and sparkles in the late afternoon sun, and I know the E is working. I feel a great peace come over me and I concentrate on the feeling, hoping to memorize it so I'll be able to somehow find it again after the E wears off.

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It's opening night and the church, which has been transformed into a theatre, is packed to standing room only, and I'm so nervous I'm nauseous. The entire cast has been outfitted so convincingly in costume and makeup that they seem like different people altogether. The director tells us not to break character once we're in costume, and in fact no one does. Not even me.

The pastor leads us in group prayer and there are people from the congregation—volunteers, many of whom I've never seen before—sitting in chairs lining the backstage halls, murmuring and touching us as we pass back and forth. They are the prayer team. I embrace a few of them and they wish me good luck. I still feel nauseous, but I'm empowered. I'm certain that for once, God is on my side.

The music—an impressive score written specifically for this year's production and performed live by the church band—begins, and the curtain rises. My heart pounds and I grip my prop, a basket of linen. My eyes are fixed on the stage manager's headset and when it starts bobbing up and down and I stride purposefully out to my position onstage. The lights come up and we launch into our lines.

Three hours later the play ends and the applause is thundering. In the lights I can't see beyond the first three rows but I can feel the stage shaking under my feet as hundreds of people stand and clap. For me it feels just as unreal as the play itself.

When we're all done onstage I wiggle out of my costuming and rush out to meet

my friends who've come to see the play and are waiting for me. My best friend Lorie has brought me a potted plant because she knows I don't like flowers that wilt and die and I beam at her, grateful for a friend who knows me so well. A few of my other friends confess to me later that they found the play "disturbing" and "graphic." The blood is fake, I remind them. By the way, what did you think of Jesus? I ask.

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After two more weekends of running the play, I'm spent. I want to go home and sleep. I'm tired of the late nights and early mornings, the tense anticipation, waiting for cues behind the scenes, thinking up new and interesting ways to fold cloth and pantomime conversations with my fellow townspeople. Everything has become routine. I'm tired of the church people always praying for help with this or that situation. It reminds me of kids and Santa Claus. I feel more and more like an imposter backstage. A non-believer.

At the final performance, I do something that surprises me, something that—try as I might—I haven't been able to do for the entire production. I cry. I cry the kind of tears that we're supposed to cry upon learning of Jesus' resurrection. Great big fat tears of happiness rolling down our made-up faces. For me the tears start just as they are supposed to, tears of gratitude and relief. The tears continue backstage, even after our final curtain call, and I hug everyone in the room. Someone delivers a message to me backstage that my mother is here. I cry even harder.

Later that night the cast convenes for a celebratory farewell, but I tell everyone I have other plans. It's my night to see Pete Yorn, and nothing short of an act of God will make me miss this concert. Lorie and I get to the Warfield early, before even the opening act starts, and stake out two spots at the very front of the pit just behind the metal barriers. We're unusually aggressive when people try to edge in front of us. Our backs ache from standing in our high-heeled boots. We don't drink beer because we don't want to have to go to the bathroom and lose our spot.

When Pete Yorn finally takes the stage the first thing I notice is that he looks nothing like Jesus/Justin. There is no connection at all. How I came up with the comparison in the first place now seems inexplicable to me. I barely have time to give this any thought when Pete Yorn kneels at the edge of the stage just in front of us to touch the many outstretched hands reaching across the barrier. I reach out my hand, too, and when I feel Pete Yorn's hand connect with mine I close my fingers around his. It's only a split second but I don't feel him pull away immediately and I relax my fingers. He holds my hand for another second or two before releasing it and moving on and for the first time in a long time I feel something like joy.