

BORN AGAIN

A Fictional Memoir

By Joe Gallagher

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This book is dedicated
to two of my earliest friends.

John Hoover
who helped me expand my mind
and
John Smith
who helped me expand my heart.

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JOE GALLAGHER



PROLOGUE

Usually when you leave your doctor and hear you have maybe six months to live, it would be devastating; however, I no longer fear death. Some trepidations remain, but not the gnawing fear. It has been almost 45 years since everything changed. The world is a different place.

Everyone has the answer now: You will be reincarnated. There is no death. There only is change. Those who choose not to see this call themselves the *Pure*. They believe what we see is a distortion and not reality. They say it is the devil corrupting us or we have evolved to where we are imagining shared memories of past lives. While there are some derogatory names for this faction, we call them the *Nonbelievers*.

I didn't expect factions. We all now are called by our faction. Your faction is determined by what you believe. Reincarnation being a common event has led to diverse opinions.

Even the 12 of us, the *Originals*, as we call ourselves, have different opinions. However, regardless of our personal beliefs, we now are called the *Apostles*. In my youth, I would have found this designation sacrilege. Most people believe reincarnation has religious implications,

therefore the religious moniker. Even the *Damned*, who view endless reincarnation without the presence of God as the definition of hell, call us *Apostles*.

The largest faction of those who do not accept a religious answer are the *Pragmatists*. It's an odd name considering what they choose to see and not see.

Many of the *Pragmatists* become historians. Without the weight of religion or being constricted to their own ethnic group or nationality, they do a remarkable job of seeing history through an unbiased filter. They hear stories from sides that did not have a voice in the past. This was made possible by finding people with past lives not previously written.

No longer is history written only by the victors. We can talk to Native Americans in the United States or Cretans in Greece or whoever was vanquished in past wars and get a more complete story.

While some religious factions strive to do what is right, *Buddhists*, *Revelationists* and others are juxtaposed by those who have perverse angles and are self-indulgent. The self-called *Righteous*, more commonly called the *Vengeful*, look for people who were villains in the past, such as Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, and torture them. The *Damned* try to repent but have splintered off groups such as the *Id* who do whatever their baser instincts tell them and the *Anarchists* who want to destroy society. You must be on constant alert in this new world.



Everything began with John, then moved onto others. Once we realized we could pass on this ability to others to see their past lives, things moved geometrically. The point of no return was the first time this was discussed openly on TV without a modicum of derision.

I do not feel joy like I have before. My emotions are muted. My

wife's first reaction to John was that he was dangerous, and she always has been more intuitive than I. John began causing problems for my small parish on day one.

But what could I do? The truth is the voice of God. ... I didn't have an option. I had been chosen, but to what good? That is the question with which I struggle. Not a day goes by that I don't pray for an answer.

Some scientists find this new world fascinating, but I am not a scientist. I am a man of God and I am tired, so tired of being asked the same question over and over. The one question where I once had all the answers. The question which brings most people to religion: "Why are we here?"

I used to have an answer, a good answer. We are here to serve God and be rewarded in the afterlife. But what if there is no afterlife?

My advice now seems hollow. I had lived my life with purpose trying to do the right thing. I had known why we live our lives the way we do and what it means for all of us. After John came into our lives ... everything changed.

I only saw him for a flash and then never again. I lost the connection after that moment leaving me with only the questions, where was he and why him? There was nothing innately special about John. He'd be the first to admit it. He wasn't exceptionally intelligent and certainly not a pious man. He didn't have an overwhelming sense of purpose or will. He was an everyman.

I never found anything special about his past, either; however, we didn't get to finish those discussions. Everything seemed disjointed. Was the path he took important? If things hadn't played out precisely as they did, would the world still be the same?

These questions torture me, and I know with certainty that even after the sweet release of death, my questions will remain unanswered. I have scoured the world looking for answers in any theological text I could find. I have studied John's life thoroughly.

JOE GALLAGHER

I don't know all the details, but things for John changed in Elberton. From that point, it took only a couple years until the whole world changed.

— Abraham



CHAPTER ONE

Where have I been?

So how did I end up in Elberton, the granite capital of the world?

My name was John Jacobs. I had been doing construction outside of Atlanta for years. The pay was decent, but the work was on and off, so I continually looked for new jobs. I was complaining to my foreman about the lack of steady work, and he told me to speak to his cousin Ronnie, a stone cutter. They were hiring stone cutters in Elberton, and with my construction background, he told me I could get a job.

I got Ronnie on the phone and set up a meeting. We met at an all-day breakfast place, the Huddle House, about five miles from where they were holding interviews. I had hoped to get some pointers for the interview; instead he asked me questions about equipment I never heard of and what type of relevant experience I had. After our conversation, he seemed less than optimistic about my prospects.

As I mulled things over, I concluded the foreman, Jim, had used this as an opportunity to get rid of me rather than legitimately trying to

help me. Competing against a bunch of applicants with stone-cutting experience made the five-minute interview brutal. My stone-cutting career was over before it had started.

Getting in my car, ready to leave, someone yelled, “Hey, aren’t you the other dickhead who rolled up here from Atlanta?” Steve and I hit it off immediately.

We hung out in a bar until it closed and spent the night in our cars. The next morning, we had breakfast and one of us asked: “Why head back to Atlanta? We could find work here with less cost and no busy city bullshit.”

Steve was a clean-cut looking guy in his mid-30s with short, blondish hair. He dressed well and was the type of guy who ironed his blue jeans like many people in the South. He gave off the appearance he came from money, but I knew he didn’t. His best quality was being a relentless smart ass.

We were the odd couple. I was about 5-foot-11 and towered over him. Also, I wasn’t particular about the way I dressed. I looked like what people would expect of me ... someone who had bounced around doing odd jobs his entire life. I was thin, a smoker, and had a short fuse for other people’s bullshit.

Now in my late 40s, I had graying black hair and a tattoo on my right arm.

We were both able to find jobs. Steve had a landscaping background and was lucky enough to land a job with the local golf course ... a full-time gig with decent pay.

Unfortunately for me, it was back to construction.

We decided to split a two-bedroom apartment. Nice enough, single story, mostly brick with a white pitched roof. The apartments looked like little houses. Cheap apartments seem nicer outside of the city.

Early on, like a newly married couple, we felt obligated to shoot the shit each evening. He would tell stories about his days playing bass

in a band in Atlanta. I typically would talk about funny things that happened working construction.

We ended up in a routine where most nights we would grab a few beers and bullshit until we went to sleep. We rarely talked about anything important.

It took a few weeks, but one night over more than a few beers, we got to really talking. He finally felt comfortable dropping the rich boy façade, and I talked to him about my dicey past. We talked a bit about our families, but neither of us had much to say. Steve's parents also had divorced. His father died under questionable circumstances, a gunshot to the head. Police viewed it as a suicide, but Steve knew his dad was mixed up in drugs and felt it was a deal gone sideways.

The natural reaction would have been for me to go into my own stories of people I had known who had died from drugs, but most of the time people aren't looking for you to add to their story. You might be trying to sound like you are empathetic, but it ends up sounding like you are competing for whose life was shittiest. Not to mention, these were the types of stories where I was the asshole. I had enough people who thought I was an asshole. I didn't need another.

After three months, I figured it was time to tell him what kept me up late at night. I knew everyone had their odd thoughts and stories, but I found my story hard for people to take.

For a long time I'd been thinking, this isn't my first rodeo. Sure, everyone has felt the same at some point that "I've been here before" feeling. But lately I'd been remembering more specific things, not just cloudy thoughts.

I tried to get Steve to talk about religion and reincarnation, but he kept changing subjects. He wasn't a particularly religious guy, so the subject bored him.

A week later, I was blunt and probably a bit too sped up after a bad day at work. I let Steve know I wanted to talk about something

important, so I grabbed a couple of beers from the fridge and began.

“I’ve always had a feeling I’ve been around this place before,” I said. “It isn’t déjà vu. It’s something more. I remember specific faces, names, whole events for God’s sake. I’m not sure what it means, but I’m not waiting any longer.”

Steve sipped his beer and winced from the cold carbonation. “Well, John as your best, and from what I see possibly only friend, I hate to tell you, but you sound like a crazy person.”

“What the fuck do you mean by that?” I snapped.

“I mean it sounds like something a crazy person would say! Remembering faces, living before ... what did you think I was going to say?” He paused for a second. “And what do you mean, ‘You aren’t going to wait any longer?’” He put his beer down and sucked back in the smoke from his cigarette.

“There’s a psychics convention in Atlanta tomorrow. I went to one when I was younger, and she told me specific things. She said I was an insurance salesman or something like that. I was married and lived in a duplex in a city.” I dumped everything on him at once. This was a mistake.

Steve stared at me for a bit, took the final puff of his cigarette and put the butt out in the green glass ashtray on the table. He waited a few seconds, then said, “I have no fucking clue what you mean.”

I was getting hot. “What part?” I asked. I wondered why he always is such an annoying ass.

He turned his neck sideways, cracking it, then shook his head violently for a second, exaggerating every movement. “Well, first off, who is she? Is she the same person who told you about the convention? Is she the one who gave you the reading? And what’s this about selling insurance? None of what you said makes any sense!”

He had a point, but he still was an ass.

“All right,” I said, trying to stay calm and organize my thoughts.

“In my late twenties, I dated a girl ... sort of a hippie chick, into beads and candles. You know, crap like that.”

“Uh-huh,” Steve said, shaking his head slowly.

I couldn't tell whether he was mocking me or truly trying to understand. I pressed on. “Well, we were walking through downtown Atlanta and happened upon this hole-in-the-wall place with one of those green neon psychic reading signs.”

I got another “Uh-huh” from Steve.

“Like I said, a hippie chick, so she twisted my arm to go in and get a reading. When she got her reading, she turned white and said something like, ‘Everything she said is absolutely true.’ She teared up, started shaking ... so, obviously I'm thinking, what a flake.”

“Go on,” Steve prompted.

“Well, then she, the fortune teller, tells me I'm an insurance broker, married, and I live in some duplex in the city!” I said. “There is no way she would have said that if she could've seen me! There was something up with her eyes. As for the convention, that's something different. It's as good a start as anything.”

“Well, that's perfect, John! You're a fucking roofer. You live in a stand-alone apartment, and you're single. I don't think you've ever been married. Sounds to me, like you got a shit reading.”

“No, you're missing the point.” I said defensively. “Like I told you, there was something up with her eyes. She was old. Her eyes were milky. She might have been blind. Regardless, I don't think she could judge my age well. If she was trying to scam us, why in the hell would she go in that direction?”

I took a breath and spoke quietly for emphasis.

“So, here's the kicker,” I said. “The crazy thing is what she said were things I had been thinking. She was telling me things from what I believe to be my past life. I hadn't told anyone about these thoughts. No one at all, until now.”

“I remember going door-to-door picking up checks from people,” I continued. “I couldn’t remember what for specifically, but it was a vivid memory. The insurance thing made sense.”

Steve didn’t miss a beat, “You mail checks to the insurance company, dumb ass! What type of bullshit would it be to have to go door-to-door to pick up checks? Maybe you delivered newspapers in your past life?”

Angry, I said, “I was in a suit and tie, you dick! I remember the person giving me the check ... a young black lady with a kid. I remember feeling nervous in the neighborhood. I remember that the most. I don’t think I was scamming her, but the whole thing felt awkward.”

“Great! You were the world-famous door-to-door racist insurance shyster. You should really look into this,” he shot back sarcastically, then laughed at his own wit.

“You know what ... kiss my ass,” I said. “I’m serious. I looked this shit up. They were called debit accounts, the type of insurance I sold. I searched the net and read about it, then it clicked. I also remember the town. It was something like Cerci. I tried to look that up too, but I couldn’t find anything. It was something close to that though. I’m sure of it.”

He saw I was pissed. “Dude, lighten up. All I’m saying is, it’s a little far-fetched. You probably saw some movie and put it together to make a story in your head. You probably have the timeline screwed up.”

He thought for a second. “The psychic told you this crazy story and over time, you started to believe you had these thoughts beforehand. If it’s bugging you, go back to community college and take a creative writing course. I mean, the other option is ...”

He stopped and made eye contact. “Wait, what is the other option?”

“I think I’m living another life. I was born, I died, and I’ve been reborn.”

He came back quicker than I expected. “Why in the world would that happen? What would be the point?”

I was expecting him to say something shitty, but this caught me off guard. “I don’t know.” I blurted not knowing what to say next.

“Well, like I said, it seems a little far fetched. Do what you want, but I wouldn’t be telling a bunch of people about this.”

“I wasn’t planning on it.”



The next morning, I got into my car. Something felt right about this, preparing for a long trip. I laughed to myself. Steve was right. If this got out, I would be ridden mercilessly. If only Steve knew the whole story.

What Steve didn’t know was my parents were born-again. That means one thing in the North, but in the South it’s entirely different. My parents met at a revival, one of those places where the religious kooks are from Hollywood movies. They’re the ones who capture the college kids on their way to spring break or create a supergerm to destroy the world. Obviously it’s all bullshit, but it sells tickets.

Besides that, some of the rituals were true. There was clapping and baptisms in the river, lots of hand-raising and chanting. My folks were not born into this lifestyle: This lifestyle was their salvation.

My father was a ne’er-do-well from Jersey. He skipped bail on some penny-ante crap and wound up a thousand miles away. My mother, on the other hand, was a Southern belle, a real debutante. She acted like her family had more money than they did, but they were certainly better off than my dad. She fought with her family about my dad, Johnny, until they gave her an ultimatum. She chose my dad, and it was the last she saw of her family and previous life.

The two of them ended up in Cordova, a small town near Birmingham. You might have heard of it. A massive tornado in 2011 devastated much of the town.

My parents got to Cordova soon after I was born. I never figured it all out. Everything was based on bits and pieces of arguments between the two of them I overheard when young. Every year those memories faded.

Dad and mom got together in 1968 and immediately dug for bottom. They got into drugs, alcohol, who knows what else. With no money and nowhere to go, they found religion as a last resort. For all the ragging the born-again got, they saved my parents. Of that much, I'm sure. They were on a sinking ship and the church gave them focus and a lifeline.

This took place close to Cordova. Neither of them ever told me how they met. They had closed that chapter in their lives forever. From the condition they were in when they found religion, it was not a storybook event to tell the grandkids ... which I never gave them.

I half thought my dad never told me the location of the church because he thought I would use it against him. He would intentionally leave out tidbits of his life such as where my parents met. He kept at a distance because I could turn on him at any minute. He was one mistrusting son-of-a-bitch.

A year after they became involved with the church, I was born during a revival. No crap. Far more than 1,000 people were chanting ... boom! My mom fell on the ground and there I was. The whole birth process took maybe 15 minutes. All types of crazy shit was said about my birth. My dad said my mom was glowing... not like a pregnant woman glows, but literally glowing like a fuckin' light bulb. Dude still might have been stoned back then, but he swore to me he wasn't.

I didn't read too much into it until recently. Most of the crowd nearby also saw something odd. If not the glowing, they heard something. If they didn't hear something, they saw a light in the sky or claimed to see another person near my mom for a moment. My mom said she knew something was happening, but she thought everyone felt

the same when they gave birth. The only odd thing everyone agreed on is that it was an unusually warm day, warm enough for them all to be outside together in early February.

Everyone had strong views about what happened that night. Some thought I was the second coming, some thought the opposite. My parents didn't know what to think.

They mired through, trying to maintain the status quo, but constantly were questioned. If I cried during a sermon, some would think I was unclean. Others would treat them differently because they thought I might be special. My parents couldn't handle normal shit, so this was way above their pay grade. Finally, my dad told someone to get bent. The next day one of the pastors spoke with them, and that was that. Peace had to be kept.

They packed up their belongings, drove off and ended up in Cordova by chance. Folks were standoffish with them for a while. I imagine Cordova was not the kind of place where random people moved in, especially ones with Jersey accents. Anyway, the community was filled with genuinely good people, and over time my parents carved out a decent life.

There was one couple who ...



HONK! Crap, I must have zoned out. I looked up and saw the light's green. Route 85 had dropped me off right in the center of Atlanta. I had been slogging through ever since. City folks are an impatient bunch of sons-of-bitches.

And there was the convention center. Holy crap! Steve was right. Look at the people walking in. I was going to be in for a bit of a freak show. Looked like you had one of two options, bald or long hair.

"Twelve dollars," said the young lady looking the other way and

holding her hand out toward me at the parking garage.

“For the ticket *in?*” I was disgusted.

“Twelve dollars.” Again. With an impressive level of disinterest, she still hadn’t even turned her head to look at me. I could’ve been holding a gun, smoking a joint, or on fire. Anyway, I was not going to get by this without 12 bucks. I fumbled through my wallet and got two fives and two ones. She took the money and the gate still didn’t go up, as the person behind me beeped.

“Hello!” Now I was pissed.

Finally, she turned to me, flustered, “Grab the ticket!”

What fucking ticket? Shit, there it was, right at eye level once I looked down from staring up at her. I grabbed it, and the gate went up and in I went. After parking on level E, five stories down, I wondered whether this was a terrible idea.