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
Ooooh, ooooh! 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 she-bang. 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-wiggy 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.

SCRIREEEEECH. 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. Hmm, 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 that than: 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.
(softier)
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 forge 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: