



The Almost True Story of Ryan Fisher
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THE AD WITH THE JESUS FISH

Even though Ryan Fisher didn't believe in God, he placed an ad in the Christian Business Directory. There were a number of reasons Ryan decided to market himself as a realtor to Christians, but the main reason was his desire to become the most successful real estate agent in Denver. Ryan was one of the best natural salesmen to ever work for Phillips and Sons Realty. He could sell ice to an Eskimo, not because he tricked the Eskimo into thinking he needed more ice—the Eskimo was smarter than that. The Eskimo could look around and see there was plenty of ice to build igloos with and to keep sodas cold. But he would buy ice from Ryan because Ryan was so likeable. The Eskimo would find every excuse to run out of ice just so Ryan would come by and they could talk football and joke around. The Eskimo would even catch himself thinking that he and Ryan could build a lasting friendship—the type where they'd have each other's families over for barbecues, and they would watch the kids play croquet in the backyard as the sun set.

Unfortunately, there are very few Eskimos in Denver.

Which was really too bad, because Ryan Fisher was in a slump. His charm and personality didn't seem to be enough anymore. He hadn't closed on a house in a month. Despite his past successes, he was beginning to feel like a complete failure—as if he were a surgeon who'd lost ten straight appendicitis patients, or a guy who'd asked every girl in high school to the prom only to be rejected by them all, or New Coke.

This story begins after another day where promising real estate leads crumbled into disappointing failures for Ryan Fisher. It was his twenty-eighth birthday, but he didn't want to celebrate. He wanted to crawl into bed and disappear. He wouldn't get the chance.

“Surprise!”

Ryan walked through his front door and saw balloons, streamers, friends in pointy hats, cake, and roll-out paper whistles. It was time to party. He should have felt touched that his wife Katherine went to all this trouble. She'd probably spent weeks organizing this get-together. He needed to act grateful. He needed to push the bad day out of his mind so he could mingle with his friends.

His successful friends.

With their exciting careers and great stories.

He was turning twenty-eight, he'd been at the real estate game for five years, and he was average. He'd worked hard and was a great salesman, but things were about as good as they were going to get for Ryan. He never got the lucky break, the right connections; and now his life was destined to spiral into mediocrity. There'd be nothing but work and two weeks of vacation a year (and even then there wouldn't be money for Greek Isle cruises or a Bahamas beach house; he'd have to settle for road trips to Iowa and last-minute discount fares to Delaware). Then, in the

end, there'd be nothing to look forward to except retirement and death.

After the party he tried to fall asleep next to his wife, but when he closed his eyes he kept seeing a picture of his friends cruising around on a yacht, sipping fruity drinks with umbrellas, while he and Katherine were in a tugboat. All of Ryan's friends were wearing white pants and laughing at Ryan. Then, thankfully, the yacht cruised out of sight leaving Ryan and Katherine to drift and stare at each other.

Ryan got out of bed, walked downstairs, flopped on the couch, limply aimed the remote at the cable box, and flipped through all late-night television had to offer.

There wasn't much. One channel had cooking gadgets. The next had Chuck Norris pitching exercise equipment. Ryan decided that most people wanted two things late at night: to get fat or skinny.

He finally settled on a rerun of *Dateline* chronicling the journey of a megachurch in Nashville. As Ryan watched he couldn't help but notice that all of the Christians seemed so happy. They laughed at the pastor's jokes as if he were Jeff Foxworthy. They sang songs and smiled and thrust their hands high in the air. It was like they were begging for affordable but classy starter homes.

The segment closed with these magic words, "There are 80 million people in America who call themselves evangelical Christians."

Eighty million people, and every one of them needs a house.

This was it. This was the answer—Christians. These people wouldn't flake out, wouldn't walk out of a deal at the closing table; they would be kind and honest and naïve; they would be extremely easy to sell small, big, and medium-sized houses to. He would be Ryan Fisher, realtor to Christians, and he would be rich and

successful. Christians were everywhere and they were going to put him back on the real estate map.

The next morning he was a new man. His coffee tasted richer, the sun looked brighter, his shower made him feel cleaner, and even the traffic jam seemed pleasant, as if it were a big party and all the other motorists were his close Christian friends.

But then Ryan realized he had no idea how to sell to Christians. So when he got to the office, he cracked open the phone book, flipped through the Yellow Pages, and learned how complicated Christianity is. He discovered that all of the churches had names that sounded spiritual, but Ryan had no clue what they meant. There were lists of churches that gathered in different parts of town with similar labels: Assembly of God, Baptist, Calvary Chapel, Episcopal, Evangelical Free, Foursquare Gospel, Lutheran, Open Bible, Our Lady of Guadalupe, Pentecostal Holiness, Seventh Day Adventist, and United Methodist. Then, there were churches that had “church” (or some allusion to church and God) in the title but did not seem to belong to any specific group: Abundant Life Center, Fellowship Christian Church, Fruitful Believers Church, Mosaic, and the Pointing People to Jesus Place. When people converted, Ryan wondered how they decided what brand of Christianity they would join.

It seemed to Ryan that it would take a lifetime to understand all of these versions of Christianity. But he didn’t have a lifetime, so he started calling churches. Most of them didn’t understand exactly what Ryan was asking. Every conversation went something like this:

“I have an offer for Christians.”

“An offer?”

“Something to sell.”

“Like—”

“Real estate.”

“You want to sell real estate—”

“To Christians.”

Click.

But Ryan was persistent, and he wouldn't give up easily. He had already spent twenty minutes calling churches. He could go for another five. His determination paid off when he got on the phone with the receptionist for Fellowship Christian Church.

“I want to sell real estate to Christians.” Ryan's spiel had become considerably shorter.

“Oh, you're calling about the Christian Business Directory,” the receptionist said.

Ryan could hear the angels singing. “Yes, the Christian Business Directory. That's exactly what I'm looking for.”

“What sort of business are you in?”

“Real estate.”

“Would you like to place an ad?”

“I would love to.”

“What would you like in it?”

“What normally goes in a Christian ad?”

“Well a lot of people put the Icthus on their ad.”

“Icthus?”

“It's the fish that symbolizes Christians. You've probably seen it on the back of cars.”

“The Jesus fish!”

“Yes, sir. The Jesus fish.”

“Yeah, I'll take one ad with my face and the Jesus fish next to it.”

The ad worked like hotcakes. His voice mail was flooded with Christians looking to buy and sell real estate.

Ryan quickly learned a couple of things: He learned Christians want to live in neighborhoods with other Christians. They want to move into homes where Christians have lived before so they can be assured their new home doesn't have a history of residents who

struggled with “worldly” things like pornography and alcohol and crack.

He learned Christians are thrilled to do business with someone who has the same values as they do. So, being in the Christian Business Directory meant Ryan had to pretend to be a Christian and agree (or at least act as if he agreed) with Christian ideals and values.

Ryan knew he didn't really believe in a higher power, and a client would occasionally make frightening political statements, but those were small things.

What's important is I'm putting good people into good homes, he told himself.

And it was fun being a Christian — it was like being part of a club. It wasn't an exclusive club like a country club or the Mickey Mouse Club; Christianity was a club that was always excited to find new members. When clients asked Ryan how long he'd been a Christian, he was as honest as he could be when he said he'd just recently become one. Ryan was scared they might lash out at him, tie him up to a post, and scream, “How dare you take out an ad with a Jesus fish when you've just recently become a Christian?”

But the opposite was true.

The newer the Christian he was, the better. When he told one client that he'd become a Christian in the last month, she broke into tears and gave him a hug on the spot. Ryan felt so warm inside, he thought his heart was smiling.

All it took was one ad with a Jesus fish and Ryan drummed up more business than he'd ever thought possible.

Just a few weeks ago, finding clients was a great mystery for Ryan. He knew people were buying and selling homes, he just didn't know how they found each other. Ryan loitered around Starbucks and playgrounds and put his name on the sides of benches and bus stops. Then he invested in a billboard; it seemed oddly

powerful to have his face hovering over the freeway, smiling at people as they drove to work. But the ads hadn't worked and Ryan could no longer afford to pay for his freeway advertising lifestyle. Soon an ad for Coors covered his face. Other people might have been happy to see his billboard go, but every time Ryan passed those blonde girls in bikinis playing tackle football in the snow, he couldn't help but feel depressed.

But none of that mattered anymore. He was a Christian now. A Christian realtor.

Still, things weren't perfect. Ryan was scared someone would ask him something every Christian should know, and when he didn't know, they would call him a pagan, rip his name out of the Christian Business Directory, put feet on his Jesus fish, and he would have to sell to people who believed in Darwinism. But there was something else, something deeper that bothered him about selling affordably priced real estate to Christians. When he did business with them, it was as if they *expected* something. Christians expected the cheaper deal, they expected not to have to pay as high a realtor fee, they expected to know when the best house was on the market, and they expected Ryan to hook them up. Ryan wanted to confess that he was in this solely for business reasons, but he could never say something like that. If he did, people would know for sure that he wasn't a Christian.

The first question that threw Ryan off came from Stan, a Baptist. Ryan had no idea what it meant to be a Baptist, but he thought the Sanders' house would be perfect for Stan and his family. The outside of the house was painted burgundy with beige trim and had a pond in the backyard where Stan's kids could breed giant goldfish. Inside there were shiny hardwood floors, three-and-a-half bathrooms, and two fireplaces.

Ryan was ready to answer any question about the Sanders' home when Stan asked, "Where do you go to church?"

“Fellowship Christian Church,” Ryan blurted.

It was the first name that came to him. He remembered the ad in the phone book had a blue sky, clouds, and a picture of a dove holding an olive branch flying through a window. It was very serene.

“Who’s the pastor there?”

“I forget his name.”

“Forget?”

“We’ve just started going.”

“Where’d you go before?”

What are you, some sort of interrogator for the Taliban? Isn't where I go or don't go to church between God and me? This is what Ryan wanted to say. But he was learning being a Christian meant never saying what you really thought out loud. So instead he said, “I just became a Christian.”

Stan wasn’t impressed by Ryan’s recent conversion. He simply asked, “How’d you get saved?”

Ryan wanted to think of a clever lie, but he couldn’t because he had no idea what Stan was asking.

Ryan didn’t know you had to get saved somewhere. He’d decided to become a Christian the way some people become Red Sox fans. He jumped on the bandwagon. He liked the people, the culture, and he wanted to be part of all the fun. He wanted to hang out with and sell real estate to all of the smiling, laughing people he saw on TV.

So Ryan was honest. “I don’t know.”

“Honey, I think it’s great we’re going to church. I’m just a little surprised. Now, zip me up,” Katherine said.

Ryan zipped up the back of Katherine’s brown autumn dress. She looked gorgeous this morning, and the dress made her straw-

berry-blond hair, her soft pale skin, and her green eyes stand out. He understood her surprise about church—he didn't want to tell her the reason they were going to church was professional. So one morning at breakfast, he just casually suggested it. And her eyes lit up. It was almost as if she had been waiting for him to ask her to church.

“Okay, which earrings do you like—the emerald or the sapphire?” Ryan hated pop quizzes like this. They weren't quizzes of opinion. There was a right answer. Katherine already knew which earrings she liked and she just needed Ryan to confirm her thoughts.

“I like the emerald.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Lucky guess.

As he watched his wife put on the emerald earrings, he felt a twinge of guilt. He hadn't told her about the ad in the Christian Business Directory. He didn't say anything at first because he was sure she would shoot down the idea. Since then, there was never really a good time. He told her everything else. He told her how he was the top salesman, how it was a record-breaking month, how he got a special parking place and his picture on the whiteboard at the office.

But still, he felt guilty because before they got married Ryan told Katherine everything. He told her his biggest fears were roller coasters and dying in a car wreck. He told her his favorite movies were all science fiction sequels like *Aliens*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *The Wrath of Kahn*, and *Terminator 2*. He told her his dream job was to be a sports-radio talk-show host. He'd argue Yanks and Sox, hold debates about the greatest quarterback of all time, and prove once and for all that the Lakers dominate the Celtics. If callers disagreed with him, he'd go Jim Rome on them.

Katherine smiled and laughed at everything he said. She'd

listen and lean closer, she would drink up his stories. He was a puzzle that she couldn't wait to piece together.

And he might not have told her any of that if he had been able to return his library books on time. But he hadn't. Still, he hated paying late fees, so he had approached the student librarian, a girl named Kate, who was wearing black wire-framed glasses and a white wool sweater. She had a ponytail and the cutest smile he'd ever seen. He begged her for an exception.

"I didn't know it was already due. I was so slammed with my paper that I forgot to return it." Ryan was lying to her. The first thing that he ever told his future bride was fiction, but not in the good Jane Austen way.

"You should have renewed the book," Katherine said.

"Yeah, well, I'm just saying, do they have to give us such a short amount of time to read a book?"

"You've had this checked out for three months."

"I'm sorry. You're right. I'm a bad library guy. Let me make it up to you by taking you to coffee sometime," Ryan said.

"I don't like coffee."

Actually Katherine loved coffee. She'd drink it by the gallon if someone sold it that way. The thing Katherine didn't like was Ryan. She knew his type. She knew Ryan was a giant scoop of vanilla ice cream. He was cute and nice and a really sweet guy with serviceable plans for his life.

But who wanted serviceable when there was a guy out there like Coen Jackson? Coen kept just enough facial scruff so it was sexy, he read Milton, and he played guitar at the Coffee Pot's open-mic night. Katherine would go to the Coffee Pot every night of her freshman year and drink caramel lattes while Coen played guitar and sang with his gravelly voice.

During open-mic night Coen sang mostly acoustic covers of Toad the Wet Sprocket and Matchbox 20, but every now and then

he'd play a song he'd written. Katherine couldn't tell exactly what his songs were about, but she thought they might be about something he'd lost. Maybe it was something important and meaningful like a parent or a girlfriend, or maybe he had just lost his direction in his life and wouldn't find love until he was with someone who understood him.

Even after all these years, Katherine finds herself thinking about Coen.

She can picture the coffee shop, his curly brown hair, and his green corduroy blazer. She can taste the warmth of her caramel latte and hear his songs buzzing around her. Then she remembers everything that happened next: how she lost her virginity and six months later he was writing songs for Sarah Michaels because she *really* understood him.

Katherine hates when she thinks of Ryan as a rebound, but at the time he was. He was comfort food. He dropped by the library every day and brought her Junior Mints and a sunflower. And every day he asked her the same question, "What are you doing tonight, Kate?"

"I'm busy."

"Okay, see you tomorrow."

And then, finally, one day when he asked, "What are you doing tonight, Kate?" she said, "Something with you."

She was a little nervous when he wouldn't tell her where they were going. Katherine worried that Ryan might take her to a candlelit French dinner, or worse, maybe he'd take her to a picnic in the mountains and see where things went from there.

But Ryan had a first date that was guaranteed money in the bank — Putt-n-Play. They would ride go-carts, play minigolf, share cheese pizza, and he would win enough tickets playing skeeball so he could buy her a plastic promise ring. Ryan stole the idea for this date from the "Karate Kid" himself, Daniel LaRusso, who

took Ali on the exact same outing.* And like Ali, Katherine found herself enjoying her date with Ryan against her better judgment. She laughed when Ryan won her a plastic promise ring, and she felt as warm as nacho cheese when she and Ryan strolled around the minigolf course eating a soft pretzel.

Katherine wasn't sure if Ryan was the one. But when she voiced her insecurities to her friends, they couldn't understand how she wasn't madly in love with Ryan. If she would come to them with concerns, they would respond with clichés: He's a dream come true. He's a keeper. Don't let that one slip away. If only there were more guys like him. He's Mr. Right. Mr. Perfect. Mr. Wonderful. He's marriage material.

Katherine did adore how stable and sweet Ryan was. He wouldn't start writing songs for another girl the second he got bored—he would provide for her, he would be a good husband and father. She would never have to worry where Ryan was if he came home late.

Still, for the first few months Katherine was dating Ryan, she thought about what went wrong with Coen. She replayed their entire six months together. Should she have been more adventurous? Was she too prudish? Did she not let him know how much his music inspired her—how it seeped into her soul? She told herself that it was none of these things. Instead, what she loved about Coen made him reject her—he was a free spirit. He couldn't be with one girl, otherwise he'd just be a guy with a girlfriend who went on dates to Pottery Barn to plan what sort of drapes they would hang in their first house. Guys like that aren't scruffy artists who create soul-searching music; guys like that are more like Ryan—handsome, kind, and, well, serviceable.

*Ryan knew that if this date could work for Daniel—a poor boy from Jersey who got his butt kicked on the beach the first day of school, and even got beat up on Halloween, the day most bullies took off to smash pumpkins and steal candy from the neighborhood children—it could work for him.

Katherine was about to graduate, and she knew she didn't need a souped-up '67 Mustang like Coen. She needed a Toyota Camry like Ryan. And Katherine felt guilty every time Coen crossed her thoughts, because she knew that with Coen, she felt passion.

With Ryan, she felt safe.

And Katherine's suspicions were right—her life with Ryan was stable. He was a good provider but not very organized, so Katherine paid the bills, checked the mail, and got the oil changed every three thousand miles.

Life was harmonious monotony.

This morning was different. They were up so early they could see the sunrise—well, maybe not the sunrise. It was ten a.m. before they were dressed and in their Jetta ready for church—but it was a lot earlier than they had ever been out on a Sunday morning for as long as Katherine could remember. And as they sat in their car, they felt clean. This Sunday wasn't weighted with the duty of unfinished chores or the gloom of Monday morning around the corner. This Sunday they were going to church. They were dressed up, and they had a purpose.

It wasn't necessarily church that excited Katherine—it was change. Katherine thought about the friends she could make. Church seemed like the place where sophisticated people were, a place where she could meet women who'd drink wine and discuss great works of literature.

Ryan eased the Jetta out of the driveway. He drove his wife through the streets of suburbia, past the lawns littered with crisp orange and yellow leaves, and toward Fellowship Christian Church, where their stable existence would be forever altered—because by Sunday afternoon they would be Christians.