

Night was falling.

The water of the pond became still, dark. There were no ripples on its surface. In the darkness, the sickly green shades of its water were not visible.

The grass grew crisper, firmer. In the death of sunlight, a faint chill became manifest, and blades of grass were sharper. But it was not felt by the campers.

The hum of locusts rose in the air. As the night became a deep black, it ceased, leaving behind the sound of something else.

The stars gleamed down from above, but in the forest they were not visible. There was always Something blocking them. And when that Something blocked them, they ceased to be real, as if the Thing covering them were more real than they had ever been, consuming their dead light in the darkness of Its silhouette.

And as the colors of the forest changed, the warmth of sunlight withdrew from Camp Havenside.



Timothy felt a strain in his chest.

He checked his phone for the time. Evening worship would be starting in thirteen minutes. He turned to his left, faced the great clearing between the pavilion where he sat waiting, and the boys' cabins. He set out.

The door to the cabin was before Timothy. He entered.

“ gah, where is it . . . ”

. . .

“ Shane, I swear . . . ”

. . .

The inhaler was on Timothy's bed.

“There . . . *ccssssurrrp*—oh . . . there we go . . . ”

. . .

Timothy held the inhaler in his hands.

. . .

There was an empty cabin behind Timothy.

...

There was nothing behind Timothy.

... *nnggkgh* ...

Nothing.

... *eeuuuggggoooanhanggh* ...

Nothing but the sound of breath.

... *hhggnnnggh* ... *nnggh* ...

Timothy turned around.

...

Something was before Timothy.

“... hh ... hhh—*hunkb?*”

Camp Havenside

The inhaler clattered on the floor.

“... hhhherrghhh ... hhhheurrrghh ...”

... *gguuugghh* ... *ohnggh* ...

“... hhhhhhhhheeyuuabhhrrrggg—!—!—!”

... *ggghhhonghonghangghhh* ...

“... hhhhhh**bckb**—! **bckb**—! hhhhhhhhhnnnnnnneeggghhhh ...”

... *gggghhooeggghhh—snggghghgh* ... *sngghh* ...

“... hhhhheeygh ... hhhggggghhhnnnnn**aygh**—!”

“*hyyyghk*—! *hyghk*—!”

“*bbbbbbbbbbgh—YAKH—!*”

Timothy fell to the floor.



Sam read his Bible.

*"Because he loves me," says the Lord, "I will rescue him;
I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.
He will call on me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble,
I will deliver him and honor him.
With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation."*

"Sam?"

He craned his head upwards at a slant, found her face.

"Can I talk to you for a sec?"

His eyes were sterile, still.

"Sure, yeah."

Sam stood up from the metal chair, followed Grace out into the field, distant from all the people seated under the pavilion. Off to the side, Calvin leaned over a computer, preparing the hymn screen for evening worship.

Grace stopped walking, turned around. Sam stopped his steps.

"So . . . I know we don't really, like, talk much, but . . ." Her eyes were steady and dark, disconcerted. "For some reason, Heather told me that . . . that, like, I needed to be careful with you? Or around you, or . . . or something like that?"

"Oh. . . uhm . . . yeah . . ."

Sam's eyes felt a push away from hers, almost magnetic.

"So . . . so, I don't really know . . . I, I really have no idea where it came from, but . . ."

There were facts. There were words. There was spoken, there was unspoken. He opened his mouth, and it was like they were all clogged in his throat.

"There's just been this rumor going around that . . ."

Sam shifted from foot to foot. He looked down, down at his feet, looked at them for a long time. He could not look back up, not even when he said it.

"I guess that you and I . . . slept together, or something."

"Oh . . . really?"

“Yeah.”

“Huh.” She turned away, blinked. “That’s . . . um, wow, okay, do you know where it came from?”

“No idea. There’s a lot of people who have repeated it, but no one will tell me where they first heard it. I tried to get them to stop saying it, like . . . like not b-because, like, you—. . . I, I don’t mean I’ve, like it’s not that you . . . you—I’m, I don’t mean—”

“No, no, I, um . . . I understand, I get it. Yeah.”

She exhaled nervous laughter through unsmiling teeth. Sam tried to laugh with her.

“Okay, well, I just wanted to make sure is all,” she said. “Didn’t know if there was something I should be worried about.”

“No, n-no, of course not.” Sam straightened his glasses. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

She nodded, walked away, back toward the pavilion. Sam watched her walk.

Sam looked down, then back up, headed toward his seat.

God is good!

All the time!
And all the time?

God is good!

Ain't that the truth, alright, go ahead and be seated,

How we feelin' tonight, Camp Havenside?
Come on, now, we can do better than that, how are we feeling?

Amen . . . amen . . . isn't that a beautiful sound? Voices, all of our voices made into the *single voice*, of God's people. To see three different churches, three different church families and bodies of believers, become one in Christ. You see . . . *that*, in its exact form, is what God has always wanted. And that's why, in a *children gathered round Him* world that world goes against Christ and against Christians, this world where it can be challenging for us to follow Jesus in a world that doesn't, there's another will that becomes very important here: the will of the Church.

Now, the Church has been around for a long time, here, anybody—trivia time—can anybody tell me when the Church was first born?

Pentecost!

Pentecost, Acts 2

That's right, it all started at Pentecost, all goes back to Pentecost. And it's at Pentecost that Peter says those famous lines: *Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.* Now, that's the part everyone knows, right? That's the big headliner, verse thirty-eight, everybody's favorite verse to pin up on their bedroom wall. But, I personally find that the next verse, verse thirty-nine, is almost equally as important. Says, *The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.*

Now somethin' I think a lot of people don't understand, guys, is that—see, he says 'for all whom the Lord our God will call,' and then some of y'all are saying, 'Well, who is that? Who does he mean when he says that?' But what that means is *everybody*, guys. God wants *everybody* to be a follower of Him and to dwell in His Spirit.

You see, the will of the Church is to worship God—simple as that. That's all we exist for, it's all we live to do. But the thing is, guys, the issue comes whenever people start seeing their own wills as different from the will of the Church—that's when atheism, sin, and idolatry start happening. But if you're part of the Church, your will is gonna be the same as it: to worship God. Now it might look different, might take a different form, but ultimately your will is the same just as

your salvation is the same; Jesus died for the sins of *all* humanity, which means that, whether you know it or not—*did He make the same person 7 billion times*—and, to be frank, whether you like it or not—*all in His image? all Himself? narrow*—you, just by virtue of existing, of being a human who exists, you belong in the Church. That's why we've got open doors! It's why we stress so often that diversity in the church is important—doesn't matter where you come from, your skin color, your gender, nationality, *something I'm not getting*—you are welcome here, and you belong here, amen? It's what God originally intended, and why He sent His promise and His Son for *everybody*. That's why the only comfort—the only real, fulfilling, lasting comfort anyone has ever found is in the Church. *NO*

This morning, we talked about the idea of guardrails, and the idea of something you deliberately put in place to prevent you from going off the path that God wants for you. But what about when those guardrails *do* break? What do we do when we find ourselves thrown off of the road, and we don't have any more guardrails there to catch us? Well, those of you who can drive—or maybe just your parents—will know the answer here: You need insurance. You need someone to make sure you're gonna be okay, that you're still living as God wants you to, to make sure you don't stray from the righteous path—and who knows that path better than a group of people all following that same path? *stray from the herd, already strayed, I have*

And y'all, I've heard this tale told before; there's so many people these days who say, 'Yeah, God, I'm on board with You, I like what You got going on here, but Your people? Your bride? Nah, I don't know about that. I wanna be a Christian, but not part of the Church.' But what they don't understand when they say this, though, is that that is *literally impossible*. It is literally not possible to be a Christian without living in the Church; God continually, all over the Old and New Testaments, over and over again, *is this what will bring me into the water* just that: a people. And it's not hard to see why, because if you want to be a Christian without the Church, what you're really saying is this: You want to live with God, but not in His house, you want to be a part of the Kingdom of God without being inside the gates, and you want salvation, but only if you baptize yourself. *ob*

Now. Does that sound very practical to you?

Guys. God does desire an interpersonal relationship, He does. But the thing is, guys, God did not come just to save you. *was that for me*

If you want to be actually following the Lord, you have to surround yourself with the other people who were saved, with like-minded people who are on the same page, under the same King, and who will make sure you're following the *always contradicts desire* thought that was everybody, *like it or not*

path God wants you to. If you don't, who's gonna back you up? Who's gonna help you keep to the path God has chosen for you? What else will keep you mindful of the will of the world, still out there looking to conform you to its sinful, complacent ways? You cannot be a Christian without the Church, it's not possible. To be a part of the Church, to share in that communal will to love and serve and worship the Lord for all eternity—brothers and sisters, *that's* what it means to be a Christian.

more?

“What else, guys? What else do you think . . . makes us think of ourselves as separate entities from the church? As these, these loose cannon Christians who work alone, with nobody else. What do you guys think?”

“ . . . ”

“Maybe arrogance? Right? Because, to some degree, by drawing a line between the church and you, you’re saying, ‘Well I don’t need them, I don’t need other people to help me with my own faith. Because I’m perfect,’ right? We like to think we can take on everything ourselves.”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . Y’know, in our culture today—”

“I don’t know.”

“—we think—sorry, what, Sam?”

“ . . . I don’t know . . . I guess sometimes . . . sometimes it can feel like I’m the only one thinking the thoughts I’m . . . thinking. And I wonder, would anyone else in the Church really . . . like . . . understand, if I told them.”

“Hmm. What makes you think they wouldn’t?”

“... It’s strange ... it can feel, sometimes ... like even when we’re all together, in a group, and we’re all singing, and we’re all praising, it can still feel like I’m singing ... alone. Almost ... almost like we’re not even praising the same god.”

“Well ... what other god do you feel you’re praising?”

“...”

“...”

“... not ... not the s—a different god, I ... I don’t really know what made me say tha—”

The door opened.

“Welcome back.”

“Where is he?”

“I couldn’t find him anywhere around the pavilion.”

“Oh man ...”

“Do you think he’s at the cabins?”

“Probably. I wouldn’t worry about it, I think he’s just in the bathroom.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I saw him walking back to the cabin earlier, before service even began. I just figured he’d be back by now.”

“Okay ... hope he feels better.”

“I also hope this is the only time we have to take Shane’s word for something.”

Laughter. “Fair enough.”



*As I went down in the river to pray
Studying about that good old way
And who shall wear the starry crown
Good Lord, show me the way!*

“Alright!” Dennis’s voice shot out. “See y’all at eight in the morning!”

The mass of concentric circles disbanded, arm-linked worshippers separating. Around Sam, voices that were just previously raised in harmonic praise went back to chatter, laughter, soft words. He didn’t say anything. He looked down at the pile of glow sticks in the center of the devotional.

Sam took off his Camelbak to empty it for the night—he was struck rapidly against the shoulder, and he felt it yanked from his hands.

“*Sacrifice!*” Shane howled, both fists in the air and one clutching the pouch, fleeing fast into the night. “Air and water for Gilly!”

Shane sprinted, both fists in the air and one clutching the pouch, fleeing fast into the night.

“Shane, swear to . . .” Sam sighed. He was struck again from behind by Molly’s broad body, sending him with her into a sprint.

Shane reached the dirt road, kicking pale brown puffs into the air, then set off toward the edge of the boys’ cabins. Molly followed him, and Sam followed her. When they reached the dirt road, they took the same turn Shane made as he coiled northward, speeding past the cabins. He sprinted toward canteen just a few feet more before meeting the forest wall, slipping straight into it.

“Shane!” Sam halted as they reached the wall. Molly went past him, preparing to penetrate the brush, then stopping to turn to him.

“Come on!” she urged, invisible syllables uttered behind an infantile grin. “He’s gonna get away.”

Sam stood still. He looked at the dark wall of the woods.

“I mean,” Sam said. “He’s gonna bring it back eventually. We share a cabin, I’ll see him.”

Molly tipped her head downwards. She looked up through her eyebrows, lower lip slightly extended as a babe’s. “Is Sammy-boy afraid of the dark? The dark, scary forest?”

Sam's feet shuffled, shifted. Molly stood, hands on widened hips, eyes bowed derisively like two twinkling opals. He looked at her. Her back was strangely straightened and her shoulders were thrust back. Or her torso was thrust forward. He looked at her, looked at her and then looked at her eyes. He felt he could smell something, dark and unnamable, or if he could not smell it he felt it in some equally unnamable way. A dark and phantasmal pheromone. Incense burning on the altar of her skin.

"I-I'm not *afraid* of anything, I just . . . you know Shane, he'll always come back."

She stepped forward, claiming his hands. "Or. We come together. How about that?"

Sam looked at her.

"I . . . what do you m—"

Molly jerked him along as she withdrew rapidly into the forest, her elated laugh like the cry of a screech owl. Sam stumbled through trees with her, braced for thorns and scratches, but received none. Molly sped away, her grip on him remaining but diminishing until again he was following her. He did not know why; he did not ask himself.

Footfalls were hardly his own, but they carried him along on their blissful, suspended rhythm. He felt a laugh lodge in his larynx, from within and without, until it claimed both territories. He laughed at the trees, the leaf-covered ground; he laughed at the sky. His skin tingled, and he felt it inside of him as well, like a song his body was singing without his voice. He closed his eyes, he opened them. There was so little difference; in either the essence followed him, courted him, made him synonymous to it. He felt it clouding all senses, ceasing all sensations, replacing everything with a scent so stinging and bitter at first breath, then intoxicatingly bending him to its favor of him.

He closed his eyes and the words came back—the verses, the crosses, the stumbling blocks. The rolled tombstones, the pillars of salt, the hair used as a mop for feet. The three days, the seven sins, the twelve apostles, the thirty-nine lashes, the one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed. The weeping eyes of Mary, the glaring eyes of lions, the inescapable eye of God. But when he opened his eyes, he did not see them at all. They were not there.

"Shane!" Molly screeched. Her pale arms swung like oars, skin bright against the black background of the forest, young among the old earth. She cried the name again and surpassed Sam in speed, somehow faster than she had been in

the field, and he doubled over breathless. He panted, throat hoarse and hot without his Camelbak. His eyes followed Molly until she vanished in the overflowing cloak of her own hair, blacker than the sky, merging inseparably with the darkness, a creature of the night.

Sam panted. Air ran in and out of him as he stood up straight, then looked around, then thought, then realized. Realized where he was.

Trees shifted. Branches twitched without wind. Insects were muted as though to avoid interrupting something. It was quiet.

Sam looked up. The stars were not visible.

Trees shifted.

Branches twitched.

Leaves were disrupted step by step, lightly, slowly. Getting closer.

He turned to his left. A figure sprinted toward him. But it did look conscious of his presence, looking over its shoulder, pacing tentatively. Sam squinted.

“Grace?”

She stopped, looked around her. She saw him, approached him.

“Who is that?” she whispered.

“It’s Sam.”

She shushed him. “Don’t talk too loud.”

“Why not?”

“Because . . . I . . .” She beckoned with one bony shoulder. “Here—let me show you.”

Sam followed her, ducking his head, leaning over her shoulder. Through gaps in the twigs he could see a small moonlit circle. He squinted; it was the miniature clearing that, in continuation of the trail, led to the abandoned cabin.

Grace squatted like a stork, staring through the gaps, then beckoned for Sam to join her. He crouched beside her, followed her pointed finger.

“See?” she said, her voice hushed with quiet laughter.

Sam squinted harder. In the sparse light, he could make out two black forms, masked partially by foliage. They were two forms, but they looked as if merged into one. He stuck his head forward, held back from falling by Grace’s hand. Two campers, silhouetted, rolled and rustled in the fallen leaves, faces pressed together.

He looked to Grace. She covered her mouth with laughter, and he did the same. He looked into her eyes. When he did, he saw that she was looking into his. He stopped laughing. She did too.

Grace lowered her hand, revealed her face to him. Sam did the same.

. . . almost like we're not even praising the same god.

Always the followers massed about him, bleating and quivering like sheep. Always the thin, gold-edged pages between his fingers and in his eyes. Always the bodies and the pews and the hymnals hanging over him like toys over a crib. Lost, always lost. Lost in the button-up shirts and the skirts of measured inches, lost in the presence and absence of instruments, lost between the golden bowls passed from hand to hand to hand to hand to hand to hand to the empty reception of the empty receptacle. But here there was none of that.

The words and codes and whispers lost their motion, blurred into abstracts, faded into the smoky obscurity of that moment. A moment where nothing was certain, nothing was defined, nothing was calculable. There was only him, and her. There was only him, and her, in the wild sylvania of the earth, discovering their own nature. There was only him and her, chasing the chase itself, sneaking and darting among the trees of the garden and finding one another in the clandestine darkness, as if hiding.

Hiding.

From whom did they have to hide?

Camp Havenside

“... what was that?”

“...”

“...”

“... I don’t know.”

“...”

“...”

“...”

Sam closed his eyes. He listened. It was a rapturous sound. It was a noxious sound. It was a sound he could not place in any way, except that it was some kind of voice. And it was awful.

Sam turned, found the direction. He held Grace's hand, gestured. He led her slowly in the direction they had come from, then turned right, pushing through interwoven twigs. Gaps shined through the branches. Moonlight glimmered beyond the twigs but Sam couldn't see anything. He could only hear it.

Sam turned to Grace. Her face shook.

Swallowing, she silently peeled back the branches.