

T U E S D A Y

“Alright, everybody up.”

Thatcher did turn on the lights.

“Awgh . . .”

“Ohh gosh . . .”

“Ugh, why . . .”

Thatcher did speak.

“C’mon boys, it’s a beautiful, sweltering, *agonizingly* hot day outside, just waitin’ for ya. Let’s go, guys.”

“What time is it?”

“It’s a gorgeous eight o’clock.”

“What if I’m comatose?”

“Then I can carry you. I got good arms. Shane will help. Speak of the angel, Shane, wake up.”

“Nnnnnn . . .”

“Shane, rise, my child.”

“I caaan’t.”

“Oh, you caaan’t, why nooot?”

“I’m . . . too scared to go outside.”

“And why’s that . . .?”

“ . . . Gilly’s gonna get me.”

“Yyyyeah, I think you’ll be alright, get on up now. You too, Caleb.”

“I’m trying . . .”

“Hey, give Caleb a break, he’s all wiped out from *talking* all night.”

“Yeah, probably still sleep-talking right now.”

“I’m sorry . . . I can’t help it.”

“Gah, if I hear one more thing about trees walking outta you.”

“Yeah, Caleb, why don’t you tell us some more about the trees, why don’t you do that . . .”

“Timothy, my boy, as James Brown once said, get up *offa* that thing.”

“Mmmrrr . . .”

“I positively couldn’t agree more, we should all be rising as quickly as possible. Flagpole is a-waitin’.”

“Thatcher.”

“Yes?”

“Are you gonna make us sing the Alligator Song?”

“*Make* you? My friend, I wish to inspire and *empower* you to sing the Alligator Song, I’ll never *make* you do anything.”

“Oh, he’s gonna make us sing the Alligator Song.”

“Well I guess you’ll never know unless you make it to flagpole in time—and since I have exceeded all others in speed of camp readiness, *I’ll* be there in no time. Alright boys, flagpole in ten minutes, no later. Timeliness is next to godliness!”

Thatcher did close the door behind him.

Thatcher did walk away from the cabin.

“Morning, Thatcher.”

“And good morning to you, my friend.”

Thatcher did pass the camper by.

“Ah, flagpole coming already, huh?”

Thatcher did gesture to the sky.

“Bright and early!”

“Man, how do you have that kind of energy so early . . .”

“Pshh, it’s only eight.”

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“And if it was seven?”

“Bah, that’s nothing either.”

Thatcher did keep walking.

“Morning, Thatcher.”

“And to you.”

“Ah, I see Thatcher has busted out the signature camp bro-tank.”

“Hey, tradition is tradition.”

Thatcher did weave between campers walking from cabin to bathhouse, did slip out onto the gravel road, then the grass.

“Morning, Thatcher.”

“And to you, Kylie. Molly, Judith.”

“Hey Thatcher!”

“Morning, Molly; wow, you’ve got more morning energy than my entire cabin.”

Giggling. “Not surprised.”

“But the real question: is your singing voice ready?”

Giggling. “I’m gonna try.”

“Hey, what more can I ask, after all.”

Thatcher did look at the trees, the sky, the morning clouds.

“How are we doing, campers?”

“Good.”

“Tired.”

“Well, we gotta do something to *fix* that, don’t we?”

Thatcher did keep walking. And he did reach the flagpole.

“Morning, Thatcher.”

“Good morning indeed.”

He did find Dennis Reeves, standing by the flagpole in sunglasses and a cap. Thatcher didn’t see Dennis’s eyes behind them; he couldn’t.

“What’s the plan for today?”

“Alligator, then Positive Attitude, I think. Laughing Song, if need be.”

“Ah, Laughing Song, forgot about that one.”

“I try to as well.”

Thatcher did laugh with Dennis. He did not look at Dennis, did turn out to face the gathering crowd. He did raise his voice:

“The stars have arrived, make way, make way.”

Thatcher did look out among them. He did smile. He did see each and every face, remember the last conversation with each of them, did recall each one distinctly. He did see Timothy, looking relaxed, happy, even. Thatcher did feel relief, and did remember their last conversation with specific detail. He would rip his heart out for that kid—he did know that, know it very well. He did exhale, did smile.

Thatcher did turn and look at Dennis, did check to see if he was ready. He did wait for Dennis to look back at him, confirm, then did turn away. He did wait for Dennis to start, but Dennis said nothing. He did open his mouth, then close it. He did feel it dry.

Thatcher did look down—then back up. He did smile. Smile at his youth group.

“Alriiiiiiiiiight, how are we *feeling* this morning?”

He did hear groans.

“Dennis, that is the most energy I’ve witnessed in camp history.”

“The most by far.”

“A true achievement of our time—but! I think we can do at least a little better than that. Wouldn’t you say?”

“Agreed.”

“I said . . . how are we *feeling*—! this morning?”

He did hear cheers, groans, a mixture.

“Alright, repeat after me, now. . .”

Thatcher did clear his throat.

“Alligator!”

Alligator!

“AIIIIIIligator!”

AIIIIIIligator!

“AIIIIIIIIIIIIligator!”

AIIIIIIIIIIIIligator!

Thatcher did continue the song. He did keep the song going for the campers, did keep their energy up. He did not turn back to Dennis until the song was over, when they were to start another song. He did look at Dennis, did ask him things, questions. He didn't quite remember what words he said seconds after asking them. Dennis looked back, responded, and Thatcher did listen but he didn't see Dennis's eyes; he couldn't. He still couldn't.

They did decide on the Laughing Song. And Dennis smiled. And Thatcher did smile. At Dennis, at nothing. He did make sure he was smiling. Smiling out to his youth group.



Sam sat back down in the pew.

"Alright, how are we doing brothers and sisters? Got some morning people in here, I hope?"

Dennis Reeves stepped onto the stage, stubble matching his brown-and-gold hair, green eyes looking out on the pews. His face was gentle, and looked quiet even when he was speaking. Behind him, leaning against the back windows of the chapel stage, was a segment of metal highway railing, apparently taken straight off the road.

"Tuesday seems to . . . to always be the day we start to hear the most . . . the most expressive groans from the camp, shall we say." He smiled and did not laugh. "Well, those of you who are still awake will be aware that . . . that this week we've built the sermons around the word 'will,' right? And everything that comes along with that. As we've talked about, the idea of having a strong and reliable will is not as . . . as simple as we tend to think, there's a lot of components to it that make it complicated. The end goal, of course, is to have a will that lines up with God's, but to actually make this a reality, there's a few things that need to happen."

The backs of Sam ears twitched as if touched. There were sounds that weren't quite words, or if they were words they were too scratchy and hoarse to understand. Behind him. He began to turn, then stopped, turned back to Dennis.

"One of the definitions that, uh, Calvin gave of will on Sunday was 'control deliberately exerted to do something or to restrain one's own impulses.' But a lot of us struggle with that, right? Honestly, I think most of us—all of us, really—
kckhckhckh I don't know about that much
I'm not sure if it was in the cabins
abandoned cabin maybe?

I mean, that's what I heard

man, I never thought he would do something like that

would say we want more than anything to follow God, but then there are things each of us have that hold us back. Little habits or weaknesses that seem to come up again and again and again, and that's a struggle we all have. Controlling one's will doesn't come naturally by any means, and it can be a struggle for a lot of us to do, especially when it comes to urges that are particularly difficult to control, and that society tells us is . . . of course, just customary to keep on doing. Right? So, that's why today I wanted to talk about the concept of—guardrails. And how that fits into our lives as people and as followers of Christ.”

Sam turned around. In one glance, he saw Shane, Molly, other faces. A few were visibly finishing sentences. He turned back to the stage as Dennis placed one hand firmly on the iron rail.

“Now, for those of you who don't know—especially you freshmen who aren't driving yet—this thing is called a guardrail. And what these do is, essentially, if you're about to swerve off the highway, these keep you from going off course. They're strong, metal, and, most importantly, it takes a lot of force to break one. So, if you're driving on the road, and, say someone's going too fast, hits you from behind, or it's raining and the road's all wet—for whatever . . . whatever reason, you lose control of the wheel. These things are put there to make sure you don't go swerving off the road, even when you lose control of your own vehicle. And as humans, we lose control of things a lot. But then . . . then that's the question, it's not the loss of control that matters, but what happens when we inevitably do lose control. What is going to be there to save you? I really doubt they did that in the cabin, though, I mean, we would've heard it, right? Because there are things—many, many things—that God doesn't want us to do but that, even when we don't necessarily want or try to do them, we still are naturally inclined to do so because of our sinful nature. It's natural for a man to desire sex with a woman before marriage. Right? That's a perfectly natural thing, but that doesn't make it the *right* thing to want. It's not what God wants, but . . . but because it's both *natural* and *sinful*, like so many other things, then we, as Christians, need to do is to establish some lasting, foolproof methods for defending against our own sinful selves. We need guardrails. That way, we can make sure we're protected, even when we slip on our own roads.”

Sam left the chapel alongside seven other campers. Shane walked past him. He was grinning wry and clandestine to himself, then, as he turned, grinning at Sam.

"What?" Sam asked.

"Oh, nothing." The grin remained.

"What is it?"

"I just . . . heard you've been having a little fun lately, is all."

"What do you mean . . . ?"

"Oh, a nice peaceful walk in the park, a picnic under a tree, and a little . . . romp in the bushes, if you will."

". . . romp? With who?"

"Who do you think." Shane paused, as if sincerely waiting for Sam to say it.

"The one you been wanting to romp with for like a billion years now."

". . . Are you talking about Grace?"

"Ah! He admits it."

"What? I—nothing h . . . who, who told you that?"

Shane looked down, still smiling. His hair hung over his eyes and Sam could not see them. Words seemed to whisper between his own lips, inaudible but there, visible in the glisten of his lower lip.

He looked back up and snickered. "Oh, no one."

Shane patted Sam on the shoulder and turned to join the others in the family circle. Thatcher looked at Sam.

"You coming, Sam?"



"That's out—our ball, our serve."

"And that was just during breakfast."

"Yeah, lord knows what they do when they're alone."

"Look alive—look alive!"

"I mean, she's just all over him, all the time, it's so ridiculous."

"Notice me, Shane, notice me!"

"Ugh."

"Oofb—you got powned, right? That one's ours, ours is next."

"Yeah, she's like that, like, all the time."

"Doesn't anybody else see it?"

"Oh, they have to."

"I mean, it's hard to miss, really."

"Judith does, that's for sure."

“Who’s that?”

“She does?”

“Oh, of course. She’s always talking about it in the cabin, ‘Molly did this, she’s being such a slut for him,’ etcetera.”

“Oh—! That one’s out.”

“Wow, she doesn’t beat around the bush.”

“Well, that’s Judith for you. Says that kinda thing about, like, everybody. This is the first time I’ve agreed with her.”

“Why him, though?”

“Good question.”

“I think she likes the bad-boy kind of thing.”

“Gross. How about she saves it for the back of his car, or wherever those two run off together.”

“Where do you think they run off while they’re here?”

“. . . ugh, I don’t know.”

“I have an idea.”

“Watch out!”

“It just gets so annoying, I mean, it’s just *so* obvious all she wants is his attention.”

“*All* she wants?”

“Yeah, what kind of attention?”

“Good point. Honestly, I could really, like, see her doing . . . that kind of thing.”

“Even at camp?”

“Serve!”

“Yeah. Even at camp.”



“Hey . . . uh, thanks for being willing to . . . meet like this. I know we’re at camp and all, but I just . . . I ju—”

“Hey, Shane, no worries man. I’m always open to meet, not a problem.”

“Right . . . thank you. Um . . .”

“So what’s on your mind?”

“Um . . . it’s just . . . just the same stuff we’ve been talking about lately. The . . . the, um . . .”

"Have there been more?"

"... um ..."

"Hey, Shane, look at me. You can tell me. Have there . . . been more girls?"

"... yeah—y-yeah, there . . . have been."

"I see."

"... and I . . . I just heard, heard what you were saying this morning, about the guardrails and stuff and I just . . . all I could think was how badly I wish that that could work for me."

"What makes you think it wouldn't?"

"I mean . . . I mean, Dennis, I've been trying. You know that, you're the only person I've really . . . talked to about it. I've been trying to stop, I've been trying to lead a more . . . a more, like, godly life or whatever, but it just . . . I just don't get it. I don't get why everyone else, like Sam, Judith, Timothy, all the people I hang out with at church, they don't . . . have this problem. They're all able to resist the, the temptation or whatever. Like what is it about me, why am I so . . . what is wrong with me?"

"Well Shane, what is wrong with you is the same thing that is wrong with all of us. We're sinners. You know? It's in our nature, our . . . sinful nature. God doesn't see you as lesser than anyone, less than Sam or Timothy or whoever. No, to the contrary, He *believes* in you, believes you can overcome these sinful impulses."

"... I guess so."

"I know so. I really do, Shane."

Dennis put his hand on Shane's shoulder.

"... thanks, Dennis. I just . . . you're the only one I can talk to about it, really. Like, my dad doesn't really . . . do the talking thing, and . . . can't talk to my mom, obviously."

"Have you tried talking to God?"

"I . . . I, y-yeah, I've tried."

"Tried?"

"... I mean I like, prayed, or, sort of did. Just bowed, closed my eyes, and kind of . . . tried to talk like they do on Wednesday nights. But . . . I don't know, it just didn't . . . didn't feel right."

"Well, God speaks to us all the time through Scripture. I mean in 1 Corinthians, chapter six, Saul talks about something that . . . is right there with what you're saying, I think."

“... He does?”

“Yeah. In verses nineteen and twenty, he describes our bodies as being temples, you know, as being these . . . vessels for the Holy Spirit. Says that you are ‘not your own,’ that you were bought at a price. And Shane, you talk about yourself as being lesser than everyone else, as being . . . being so bad and so irredeemable, but this verse, it argues the contrary. Saul says you’re *incredibly* valuable, you are worth so much in God’s eyes. Your body is valuable, that’s why . . . you know, giving your love away like this to these girls, you’re giving away something precious. That’s why Saul says we should honor God with our bodies, not . . . not give them away.”

“... yeah, I, I guess that is true.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself, Shane. God loves you for who you are. Not like these girls do. You’re more valuable to Him than that, you know?”

“... yeah, I . . . I guess you’re right.”



“I’m telling you, dude, I saw it, she ran circles around you.”

Voices cut through the half-sustained silence of the cabin. Sam lay down, resting his eyes for the allotted free rest period. Shane hopped into his bunk, shaking the frame and bumping against the foot of Sam’s bunk.

“I could’ve beaten her, easy.”

“But you didn’t, though!”

“Yeah, really.”

“I’m telling you, I could’ve, I just didn’t want to go too hard on a girl, is all.”

“Oh, now you’re being sexist, huh?”

“Yeah, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Whatever, man.”

“If it’s any consolation, I think Sam would’ve done much worse.”

Sam opened his eyes and craned his pillowed head.

“Huh?”

“Ah, quit hatin’, Shane, just because you can’t throw eith—”

“No, I don’t mean because of his athleticism,” Shane said, teeth baring in a smile. “I mean because of the person in question.”

“... Ohhhh, yeah, that’s right.”

“Ooohooohoo, he does got a point there, Sam.”

Sam blinked a few times. "Who are we talking about?"

Shane grinned, didn't speak for a moment. "Grace. You're certainly familiar with her, uh . . . athletic build, if you know what I mean."

"Mmmhm, no point in denying it."

Sam sat up. "Who told you guys that?"

"Nobody at all."

"An angel cometh down from Heaveneth and told us the trutheth."

Sam managed an exhalation feigning laughter. "I don't know how you got that idea in your heads."

"I mean, I can only hear the bunk creaking so many times before—"

"That didn't happen." Sam sat up fully, back against the brick wall.

Shane laughed. "Alright, maybe not in the bunks, but—"

"Where could it have happened? When?"

"All I know is that it was *definitely* here at camp," Shane said, hands up.

"How do you know that?" Sam asked.

Shane shrugged. "Just do."

"Shane . . ." Sam rubbed the bridge of his nose, hand beneath his glasses.

"Hey, ain't none of us judging, I'm sure y'all make a lovely pair."

"Got a third on the way?"

"Shut up." Sam smiled without sincerity, as if his face were being tickled.

"Look at him, he's thinking about it right now, aren't you?"

"No, no, I'm not—"

"Thinking about her voice, what's it sound like, Sam?"

"Yeah, Sam, why don't you tell us!"

"Give us a little simulation."

"Yeah, just imagine you're with her, wherever you guys were—let's say, right here in this bunk."

"Ah, he's thinking about it, lookit!"

"Stop!" Sam shouted from behind a smile. "You guys, come on . . ."

"And you're there, just you and her, and . . . well, you know the rest."

"I bet he's about to pitch a tent."

"Mayb—oh, look! He is!"

Sam turned on his side. "That was my hand, it was my hand!"

"Oh, what's your hand doing down there, Sam?"

"Shut it!"

"Prove it to us, boy!"

Hands started to grab at the thin sheet.

"Give us a look, boy, give us that proof—"

"Oh, come on—"

"Hey . . . guys, where's my inhaler?"

Timothy's voice left the cabin quiet, the question unanswered. He repeated the question.

"I haven't seen it," a voice mumbled from the far end of the cabin.

"Well it's not under my pillow, where I left it."

"Did you take it anywhere with you?"

"No, I always keep it under my pillow."

"Well, I haven't done anything with it."

Timothy stood up from his bed and began searching, looking under the bunk, around and atop the others. Sam scanned vaguely. The door opened, letting in Thatcher amid a shaft of yellow sunlight.

"Alright, boys, lunch approaches."

"Thatcher, have you seen my inhaler?"

"No, I haven't, bud. You lose it?"

Timothy sighed. "I left it under my pillow, and now it's not under here anymore."

Thatcher raised his voice. "Alright, guys, if you could look around your bunk for a small inhaler, that'd be peachy keen."

Two or three campers rose and began searching. Sam hopped down from the bunk, scoured the floors. Shane remained stationary.

"Does anybody remember seeing it?" Thatcher asked.

"It's beige, and it's got a red top," Timothy said. "Shane, did you do something with it? It may have accidentally ended up in your bunk or laundry or something."

"I didn't."

Timothy paused. Everyone in the cabin turned toward Shane. His body remained, turned away.

"Do . . . do you know who did?"

". . . yes and no."

Sam could see Shane grinning at the wall. He could feel it, even from the back of Shane's head.

"Shane, what did you do with my inhaler?"

He turned around. "I didn't do anything with your inhaler."

"Then who did? Please? I need it."

Shane smirked. "It was Gilly."

"Oh my gosh . . ."

All at once, Shane hopped into a crouch on his bunk.

"It came to me in a dream," he narrated. "It said to me, 'Shane! Taketh from Timothy his inhalereth and bring it to me—it is the only way!'"

"Shane, just tell him where it is, man," Thatcher said quietly.

"Please, dude," Timothy echoed.

"And I said, 'But Gilly, why? Why must I take the inhaler?'"

"Shane, seriously!"

Timothy ran towards Shane's top bunk. Shane stepped onto an unoccupied bunk beside it, still crouching and stretching his legs.

"And it said, 'Because! It's the only way to get Timothy to see me. You musteth take advantage of his bodily weakness and give it over to me!'"

"Shane, I'm serious, I really need that inhaler."

"So I had to, you see," he finished with grandeur. "I had to do what Gilly told me to do."

"Where is it?"

"With Gilly."

Timothy turned away in desperate exasperation, turning upward—then swiftly back down to Shane, eyes widening.

"Oh my gosh, did you put my inhaler in that abandoned cabin?"

Shane bowed his head. His hair covered all expression.

"Gilly and I together did."

Sam grabbed a shirt and pair of shorts from his suitcase on the floor, slipped them on. "I'll come with you, Timothy. Make sure you don't get lost out there alone."

"Thank you," Timothy said quietly.

"Gah, Shane, come on, man," Thatcher said. "Was that really necessary?"

"Seriously, what's the matter with you, dude . . ."

"I had to do what Gilly told me," Shane defended without eye contact, already turning back to his bunk. "That's what's the matter with me."

Sam left the cabin with Timothy behind. Grass turned to gravel as they found the road which led Sam to the concrete stair-steps the first time.

"This is so stupid," Timothy growled. "Shane's being an idiot."

"Yeah." Sam looked at the greenery running thick on their right.

"I mean, I get the joke, but, like . . . he takes my inhaler—which I, like, *need* because of my asthma—and he puts it out in some faraway place where I can't get to it if I need it, it's just . . . not cool. And I like, just got this one, like last week."

"Do you feel alright, asthma-wise?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, I just feel a little tight. That's why I need the inhaler, I just wanna be safe. And then he goes on about this Gilly thing when he like . . . basically endangered my life, it's ridiculous."

"Yeah . . ." Sam turned to Timothy, walking beside him, height up to Sam's shoulder. "Yeah, that's kind of been a . . . a thing with him, hasn't it?"

"Yeah." Timothy rolled his eyes. "I can't stand it."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I don't know, it just seems kind of . . . stupid. Gilly's not real. Why would we talk about things that don't exist? It's stupid."

"Yeah . . . you're right."

Sam looked at the forested wall, looked for the opening. It appeared moments after they had passed behind the canteen building, a wide rift in the trees. Sam let Timothy go first, then went down the concrete steps behind him, Timothy descending before him. His form was lithe and miniature, blond hair swirling over his scalp, thin arms dangling. The tree trunks on either side were each wider than his torso, towering tall over him. He carried on forward, steps heavy and devoid of momentum. The trees hung over him.

They reached the end of the path, landing at the circle of grass just before the lake. They turned, followed the muddy path running alongside the trees, and found the cabin, that gray and dilapidated structure, an earth-forsaken sacristy. Sunlight doused it like unwelcome dew, strange and radiant against its filthy walls.

"Thank gosh," Timothy said beneath his breath, then went without hesitation to the door. Sam staggered forward, catching up just as Timothy held the doorknob and pulled, meeting resistance.

"What the—?" Timothy tried again, rattling the door in its frame.

"Is it locked?" Sam asked.

"I . . . guess so." Timothy looked up and down the door. "Didn't know the thing could lock, to be honest."

Timothy tried the door again. He backed up a little, considered the door from afar. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he did, there was a small, almost noiseless *click*.

Timothy looked toward Sam. His face wore wariness and amusement in the same expression. He turned back, held the doorknob again, turning and opening it easily.

"Hello?" Timothy called into the darkness. They entered the cabin. Timothy immediately found the inhaler, like a sacrifice on an altar, lain at the base of the wall that had been drawn on. He came forward and snatched it back up, inhaling from it. Sam followed, interrupted by two sudden strikes upon his right shoulder, turning him as much as he turned himself to just barely witness two fleeing bodies, a girl pulling along a boy by the hand.

"Oh my gosh," Timothy panted. "Who was that?"

"I don't know." Sam stared after them. "Some guy and some girl."

"Oh . . . well, good thing I have my inhaler now, just about scared me into an asthma attack." He laughed lightly.

Sam closed the cabin door behind them as they left. They went back up the muddy path, but stopped halfway before reaching the forest. Judith appeared from the other side of the path, approaching them.

"What are you two doing here?"

"Shane took Timothy's inhaler," Sam explained. "He hid it in that cabin, or whatever that thing is."

"And then blamed it on Gilly," Timothy added.

Judith rolled her eyes. "Lovely. Molly said she saw Abby come down here with some guy." Another roll of her eyes. "Molly's been telling little Gilly stories almost as much as Shane. Calls this place a 'love shack.'"

"Love shack?" Timothy repeated.

"Yeah." Judith shook her head as she withdrew her phone and glanced at it. "It's almost time for lunch, let's head up." She turned and began leaving.

"Yeah, you're right." Timothy followed as quickly as she had turned. Sam stepped forward, stopped. He had heard something, or his ears felt to have. He started to turn over his shoulder, stopped, then did.

The cabin door was open. He had closed it, but it was open. It was dark inside.

He shook his head, turned back around and followed Timothy and Judith up the path.

Camp Havenside

The cabin door opened.



“Oh, it’ll getcha sooner or later,” Shane said with a firsthand certainty. “That’s bound to happen.”

“And how’s that?”

“It’s very good at hiding. One day, you walk into the cabin, it’s all empty, until *bam!*” Shane jabbed Molly in the side. “It shows up right behind you and gets ya.”

“That so?”

“Sure is.”

“So should I be afraid?”

“Oh, yeah. See, I’m on its good side. I’m making sure that once it comes, I ain’t gotta worry about nothing. Bringing it gifts and stuff.”

“Like an inhaler?” Judith said without looking up from stared at her tray of spaghetti, held the fork tightly.

“Precisely, Judith.” Shane nodded, turning toward her. “Like an inhaler.”

Judith shook her head slowly. “You’re stupid.”

“Whatever, Judith, it wasn’t even your inhaler.” Shane stabbed at his spaghetti. “Don’t got any reason—”

“Whatever! You shouldn’t do that!”

“—to be up in a tizzy about it. It was a joke between bros, Timothy knows that.”

“He’s got asthma! What if he had an attack in the middle of the forest?”

“Well, I . . .” Shane searched the air for an answer.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. You didn’t even think of—”

“I knew that wasn’t going to happen.”

“—it, did y—no you didn’t! You don’t know that!”

“Okay, I don’t *know* that, but I do *know* that Timothy’s asthma is, like, it’s mostly stress-activated, right?”

Timothy nodded without expression.

“Yeah. And it was a joke, and I knew he knew that, so it wasn’t gonna provoke his asthma.”

“You don’t know that.” Judith turned back to eating.

Shane sighed. “Besides, in the forest, Gilly would’ve taken good care of him—
—”

He disbanded into laughter as Molly slapped at his face, beating more laughter out of him.

"I'm with Judith on this one," Molly said, crossing her arms. "I think you're a butt."

"Do you?"

"I do."

Judith jabbed at her food as though mining out the remainder of a labor. She looked up, turning her gaze in the opposite direction of everyone, looking out the window instead, beholding nothing. Her eyelids lay heavy over eyes almost black behind thick-rimmed glasses. Brown bangs were pinned upwards and backwards on her head, as if to distract from the frizzy sides that had escaped the fishtail braid behind them. The queasy complexion, the frayed wires of hair, the weight pulling her eyelids down, down—Sam saw it all, felt it all. She was not looking at anything in particular, but she looked as if she did not believe there was anything to look at—at least, not anything in that cafeteria, or that camp, or that world, even. So instead she looked out the window, as if waiting for something she knew would not come. And when Sam looked at her eyes it was like he could hear them, could hear her, a plangent note crying softly of futility, futility that she had seen herself—and perhaps everyone—be consigned to. As Shane and Molly's collective volume increased, no response seemed to register from the stone of Judith's being, no flash of anger or spark of irritation. There was only her gaze out the window, seeking nothing, finding nothing.

"You're just scared of it. You're a chicken."

"I am not a chicken!"

"Are too."



"But Thatcher," Thatcher nasally imitated, "'it's still hard not to look at them. I can't help it, my eyes just go places. It's not my fault, I can hardly control it.' Sure, there may be some truth to that. A lot of times our eyes wander without our permission, right? And this happens most often when we're around girls—sure, there's a lot of truth to it. But just because it's hard doesn't mean there aren't ways to control it, right? There's plenty room for solution. It's a problem we all have—what are some things that you guys can think of, that we can do to help us control our wandering eyes?"

The pavilion was at half its normal capacity, populated only by boys for gender-divided class, the girls taking their class in the chapel. Thatcher stood on the ramshackle wooden stage against a background of white wooden lattice, a microphone in one hand and a Bible in the other.

“What do you guys think? What are some ways?” he reiterated. “You can go ahead and just, just raise your hands . . .” He pointed to a seat in the front row. “Yeah, Timothy.”

“Well,” Timothy said, “I think one thing that we could do is, like, if we catch ourselves looking at girls or we catch ourselves in a . . . in, like, a moment of lust, is like, every time we do that, we just think of a random verse of Scripture to distract us from it. That way, our focus is immediately turned from something bad to something good, so we won’t feel that . . . uh, temptation anymore.”

“That’s good,” Thatcher said. “Yeah, think of Scripture. That’ll set your mind back on the right track pretty good, for sure. Yeah. Anyone else?”

Sam leaned his head crookedly in his left hand. He was tired. He withdrew his phone to check the time; three-fifty-three, just before afternoon sports. Thatcher’s sermon, built mostly around the stories of David and Bathsheba and Sampson and Delilah, reached a slow finish. Thatcher gave Timothy the mic to say a closing prayer, and the class disbanded.

Before he could reach the water cooler to refill his Camelbak, Sam felt a touch on his shoulder. He turned to see Dennis Reeves, looking at him through sunglasses.

“Hey, Sam, can I talk to you over here for a sec?” he asked in one breath.

“Sure, yeah.”

Dennis led him in the other direction, back toward the pavilion stage, then behind the pavilion altogether, hidden by the lattice wall and surrounding trees.

“So . . .” Dennis took off his sunglasses in the shade. “First, I just wanna say that I have nothing but love in my heart for you, and this . . . this isn’t, like, ‘oh, Sam’s in trouble now,’ or anything like that, I just . . . wanted to talk to you about something without making you feel attacked or embarrassed anything.”

“Sure,” Sam said, and it sounded like a question.

“I heard . . . and, and again, just something I heard . . . that you and Grace, you know her?”

“Yeah, I, sort of.”

“Right. She’s a nice girl, a great girl. . . I had heard that you and Grace had . . . done some stuff like what we were talking about in guys’ class just now.”

Sam's mouth and eyes widened, but he said nothing. He felt in his throat that he could say nothing, words strangling together in a mute medley.

"Look . . ." Dennis put a hand on Sam's shoulder. "Again, I'm not calling you out here or saying you have to confess or anything, really, it's just . . . you know, camp is just not the place for that kind of—"

"N-No . . ."

"No? Like, you didn't . . . ?"

"No." Sam swallowed nothing. "No, I . . . I didn't."

"Okay, that's absolutely fine," Dennis said, retreating and putting his hands up. "Just making sure. I didn't want there to be anything . . . that needed resolution or anything, just wanted to check in with you."

"Right." Sam stared at the grass.

"So, yeah, that was it, that's all I—"

"Who told you that?"

"Who told me?"

"Yeah."

Dennis's mouth reopened, closed. He looked away, considered the trees. He looked back at Sam with glassy green eyes.

"No one in particular, let's just say."



"I'm trying . . . trying to control these feelings. I-I know it's wrong, but I just, I have these . . . thoughts, and I, I look at, I see . . . g-g-girls, and all of a sudden there are all these images going through my head, and I just . . . don't know what do with them, Dennis, I don't know what I'm supposed to do when I have these thoughts. I know these feelings are bad, they're . . . sinful, and . . . and I'm trying, I'm trying so hard not to think them, because I know it like, hurts God when I sin. And then Thatcher's sermon, it . . . it was for me. It was all for me, every single word. It was too perfect to be a coincidence . . . We talk about how God speaks to us . . . this was Him speaking to me . . . wasn't it?"

"I can't tell you how many times I've seen this, Shane. Someone is going through something, having some kind of . . . struggle. And they listen for God's voice, then just a day or two later, they hear His voice through a sermon. And it's everything they needed to hear. The fact that you recognize it, Shane, it shows me that you have a very strong faith. Stronger than you give yourself credit for.

You know that you've sinned, and you know God wants you to stop. That's more than many can say. It doesn't make it any easier, but . . . but this is not God's plan for you, you know. Sex with these girls that don't love you, before marriage, even, it's . . . it's just not what He wants for you. I can tell you that for certain."

"I . . . I kn-know . . . I know it's my fault I'm so lustful and—gah, I *hate* myself, why am I so—"

"Hey, hey now, Shane, there's no reason to feel that way. This is a perfectly common stumbling block for a guy your age, it's no reason to hate yourself. God doesn't want you to hate yourself, Shane—He loves you. Loves you so, so much. That's why He sees something better for you than this."

"What could He possibly see for s-someone like me?"

"A life lived with Him. A relationship with Him, and at the end of the day, that relationship is the most rewarding relationship there is. It's the best gift we've been given. And there's only one way to receive it; Acts 2, verse thirty-eight says it clear as day: 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.' It's by repenting we come to know Him, Shane. It's by repenting and accepting His grace that we can receive the ultimate gift: a relationship with God Himself."

". . . Will it take these desires away? W-will it make these feelings stop?"

"Well . . . it won't make them stop, no. We're all of us sinners, that much will always be true. But it won't be like it is now. You've been struggling with this sin for a long, long time. If you just give it up, just repent and let Jesus take that heavy load away from you, I promise you, the relief you feel will be immense. It'll be exactly what you've been looking for for so long—and I know this because I know the Lord, but also because I know you, Shane. I've watched you struggle with this for so long, but . . . but you can't do it on your own. You need His love to help you conquer your sin."

"Sin . . . s-sin . . . God, my sin, m-my sin—"

Shane laid his head on Dennis's shoulder.

"It's okay, Shane. It's okay. He has a plan for this . . . He has a plan for you."



The sky was fading.

Camp Havenside

Sam threw the disc to Molly across the circle. Molly threw it to Shane. Shane threw it to someone else, to another, to another while Sam counted.

How many?

Oh, no one.

No one in particular, let's just say.

Nobody at all.

Sam counted eight. Eight who knew, or thought they did. But how. How did they think they knew it.

Just do.

Sam abruptly received the Frisbee, interrupting a sip from his Styrofoam cup from canteen. He clumsily chucked it in Molly's direction, overzealously sending it above her and the canteen building. He watched it crash into the treetops.

"Well, if this were baseball, you'd be nothing short of perfect, Sam," Shane sneered.

"My bad." Sam replaced his cup on the bench. "I'll find it."

"It's in the tree, isn't it?" Molly said. "How're you gonna get it from there?"

"I'll figure it out." Sam started a jog around the canteen building.

"Hey, if it's in the abandoned cabin, say hi to Gilly for me!"

Sam rounded the canteen building, found the concrete stair steps, stepped quickly down their pattern.

Trees were over him. The twilight was becoming thick. The trees and the ground and everything seemed to be the same dark color. He could barely see.

He resumed walking, descending. Halfway down the steps, he turned upwards to trace where the disc had met the tree, eventually spotting it three trees to the right of the pathway. It was in a tree in the heart of the brush, fallen halfway down the trunk in a branch's grip.

He stepped off the path. His ankles felt the spiny prickles of unseen thorns. He kept his eyes on the Frisbee, so high up. Branches stroked his face as he walked, felt dirty. He could barely see.

Sam came upon the trunk. He grasped for the branch holding the disc, at the very edge of his reach. His fingers tapped it barely until the Disc fell, thumped on the earthen floor. He bent down, picked it up. He found something else beneath it.

Sam scrutinized. There was a weighty, rubber, skin-like thing in the dirt and grass, a pale beige. There was white on it, or in it. Dirt stuck to its sides.

"... hm ..."

Sam looked up. It occurred to him that it had gotten dark very quickly. Or it seemed to have; he could barely see. He blinked, and when he opened his eyes things were not as focused. Blurry, fuzzy at the edges, then surging back into clarity. But never for very long. The forest, although dark, began to only be visible between hazy clouds on Sam's vision shimmering darkly. It was almost as if the shimmers themselves were even darker than the forest. It was almost the case.

He also felt that he could hear something. Sam listened closely, heard nothing, nothing out of the ordinary. He didn't hear anything but the sounds of nature. But he felt he could.

He was not sure how long it had been when he realized he was walking. At some point, the motion of the forest around him was no longer the world moving, but him moving. He looked down at his feet as if they were not his; he could not really feel them. He was walking, he saw; he was walking in a direction, but he didn't know which one. He could see that it was very dark, or at least he knew it. But it didn't seem to stop him from being able to navigate—at least, navigating in a specific direction. Whatever direction it was.

His vision fraying, he turned to look around and saw it but he didn't. He blinked. Nothing was there.

He let his feet carry him again. Tried to see straight through the blurs. Carried the Frisbee.

He saw it again but then it wasn't. Wasn't there anymore. He blinked again, felt his hand rub his eye. He straightened his glasses, turned, opened his eyes again and saw it there was nothing there, though. Nothing there anymore, at least. The shape had already slid back into the tree. Just like it did the next time. Again, and again, and again, until his vision was so blurred and so muddled that the shape was the only thing he could see, just for that brief, brief instant of time before it became one with the tree again. Then all was again obscurity.

And then when he opened his eyes again everything was clear. It was dark, late into the twilight. He was still holding the Frisbee. He was staring at the abandoned cabin.

It was quiet. It had gotten so dark so fast. He didn't know how he had gotten there, really, or what exactly to do now that he was there. Though he felt there was something to be done.

The cabin door opened.

Sam saw it, but didn't really know that it was happening. For many moments he was unsure of what he did know. He knew that sky was very dark, seeming to get darker by the second. Then he knew he was at the abandoned cabin, and knew that behind him, around him, was the forest. And then he knew that he was very, very far away from the Frisbee circle he had left, and then that he was far away from the rest of camp, far away from everyone, anyone who he could find in a several-mile radius and he knew that he was alone and then he knew that the cabin door had opened. He stared at it; he knew it had opened. He knew it had opened but didn't know why it had opened, or who had opened it, who was even inside of it. He didn't know any of those things but knew it had opened, it had opened and he could hear something inside of it, and then he knew that he was scared, very scared, and then he knew, he knew needed to be running, then knew he wasn't running, then knew he needed to start running, needed to start running right now, and then he thought or perhaps even knew that he could see something emerging from the black, black darkness behind that door.

Sam turned and bolt, crashing into a wall of trees and fighting to break through it. They came apart with ease, let him through, all for him to be immediately lost, immediately covered in darkness, immediately blind. The forest had become a kaleidoscope of perspectives and possible perceptions, twisted and intertwined with each other in which he stepped one way, then another, then stopped, listened, turned back a different way, until his knee hit something and he stumbled forward. His hands felt the earth, the grassy brush of an incline so steep it was almost a wall. He hiked a foot up into the brush, pushed himself up, thrust into a progress, body aloft in a net of nettles stinging his skin in so many places, making it feel somehow barer for having touched them. He staggered up through the web of weeds but he could not balance, could not really control his body in any way except to move it forward, flail, heave, fight to get back to the camp he had come from as the nettles burned at his skin, tortured his body. He felt his flesh itching, skin raising in bumps covered with dirt as he kept climbing, eyes turned up past the incline where he could just dimly see the canteen building, just dimly see the camp, and he was nearly there when he reached up to grab a branch for balance and the branch grabbed him back.

He shouted, released the branch or fought for it to release him, slipped, slid back down the incline, nettles incising and biting into his skin the whole way down, and he closed his eyes because he could not look at it, and as he kept them closed the world seemed almost to shift around him, to taste him, consider him, as he was felt from all angles in ways he did not know he could be felt—

He burst from the bush. Lapsed onto the gravel pathway. Breath forced its way in and out of him. His vision was frail in his head. The disc was held tightly in quaking fingers.

He came to a stand, backed himself against the canteen building, distancing himself from the trees. He stared at them, at their motionless fact of being. And he wondered how he had gotten himself out. If it was, in fact, him who had done so.

“Like . . . can y’all seriously not just wait, like, a week? Just wait until you get home? Thanks?”

There were voices. He turned to the left.

“Yeah, it’s just, like . . . it doesn’t seem like something Sam would do, y’know?”

He slowly approached the corner of the building.

A scoff. “I don’t know about that.”

Sam glanced over the corner, saw a gazebo where Timothy and Judith sat eating their snacks, next to the canteen building.

“Do you really think it’s true?”

“Of course. It didn’t surprise me at all when I heard about it.”

“And they did it at *camp*?”

“That’s what I was told.”

“ . . . Is that really something Grace would do?”

“ . . . I mean, I wouldn’t be surprised, honestly.”

The sky was fading. Dinner would be soon. Sam turned around, headed back in the direction of the boys’ cabins. He felt the sweat and grime on his body with every step, defiled.



“ . . . I think . . . I think I’m ready.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. You know, I was first baptized when I was like, seven or eight or something, it didn’t really . . . I don’t honestly remember it, you know? But I think . . . think I’m ready to make the commitment. I want to give my life to Christ. I want Him to make me clean again after all, all this sin I’ve preoccupied myself with. It’s just . . . I want to be better than I have been. I want to leave all

of these feelings, these sinful feelings, behind me, and live the life God wants me to live. I want to be re-baptized.”

“Shane, I’m so proud of you for making this decision. Once again, I just, I can just see how strong your faith is. Really beautiful. I hope you understand, though, though this is in some ways the end of something—your previous life, your existence without God—it’s also just the beginning of something. You know? You will still have struggles, you will still have difficult times where you find yourself still broken in a lot of ways.”

“I know. I know, you’re right . . . but . . . but I won’t be alone, anymore. I’ve been alone for . . . for as long as I can remember, really, there . . . was never anyone there to help me. I want to be with Him, I want to make Him a *part* of me, want to bond myself to Him so closely that we’re always together, and I’ll never have to be alone again. And something about being here, here at Camp Havenside, it just . . . it was the right place for me to realize: I can’t do this alone. I need something more. I need someone much, much stronger than me, and that someone is Him.”

“I’m so proud of you, Shane.”

Dennis put Shane’s hand in his, holding it closely, tightly.

“So, so proud of you.”