

Scorcher

Air burned that summer. The heat transformed everything into mystifying hallucinations on the horizon. The unbreathable heat was the only thing I could make sense of in the hellish haze of that summer.

My mom's rickety Honda Civic struggled through the gravel, and as the car rolled across divots and lumps in the road, the constant tossing made my stomach turn flips in the back seat. Hoping for fresh air to relieve the nausea, I asked my mother to roll down the window. Immediately, puffs of white gravel dust kicked up from our back tires and blew into the car. The heat and the dirt choked out the breathable air and made my nausea even worse. I knew my mother would be angry if I asked her to roll the window back up so soon after asking her to roll it down, but I also knew she would be furious when she discovered the fine white dirt ground into her seat. Paralyzed, I sat in silence, clenching my sweaty fists and forcing hot, dry air in and out of my nose.

The grueling gravel road eventually dumped our car out at a parking lot next to a cluster of concrete cabins scattered across the summer campground like the cinder blocks littering the abandoned construction site across the street from our apartment building. The only building that didn't look like an oversized shoebox was the towering church perched at the very top of a hill. The silver cross atop the steeple shone under the piercing sunlight and looked more like a sword than a crucifix.

"C'mon now! We're already late," said my mom as she slammed her car door behind her and marched toward the biggest cabin. I followed her up the hill, struggling to keep my duffel from slipping through my damp hands and falling into the clinging dust. In addition to the ubiquitous white gravel, the space between the cabins was filled with brown oak trees dropping crinkling leaves. Everything was dying that summer, it seemed.

Inside the building the window unit air conditioner pumped overtime. Yelling slightly over the machine's whirring, a tall man in a black shirt with a white square on the collar talked with my mom next to the water cooler. The tall man's eyes crinkled harshly, and my mother laughed too hard to be believable. Then they went into the back office and shuffled papers around. When they finally came out, my mother swatted my hand away from the first aid supplies I had been tinkering with.

"Okay now, Sugar, be good. Do what you're told, and don't forget to smile." She leaned down and whispered hotly into my ear, "I assured that asshole that you aren't a bed wetter, so you better keep it together, you hear? I ain't gonna come back and get you if he tries to send you home early." With a stern kiss on the top of my head, she was out the door.

The tall man barked into a walkie-talkie as he walked back into his office. As he slicked back his sweat-greased hair, he called out to me, “Just sit tight. Candy is gonna come getcha in a second.”

The other kids had already eaten dinner by the time I arrived. Candy, the camp counselor for my cabin, smiled sympathetically and poured a few ticktacks into my hand. “Bless your heart, sweetie. I’m on a diet right now so I just don’t have any food to give you,” she said then gave me a once over. “Maybe you should try a little diet yourself,” she laughed.

That first night in the cabin I lay in my sticky Spiderman sleeping bag, a hand-me-down from my older brother, and tried to focus on the hot air moving in and out of my lungs. I’d already sucked on the last ticktack, but my stomach still panged louder and louder, so loudly that I worried the other girls would wake up. *Hot air in. Hot breath out.*

The next morning began with prayer. All the girls rose from their bunk beds at the sound of Candy’s bell and chanted the day’s first prayer. I clambered down from my top bunk a few second too late, causing a commotion and earning dirty glares from the girls surrounding me. That first faux pas made all my anxieties come alive. The girls would hate me, and I would spend the entire summer friendless. Mom would be so mad if she drove me all the way out here to keep on being alone all the time.

To my relief, they didn’t mock me. They didn’t call me names or run crying to Candy that I had tried to steal their food. Maybe it would be different here. After praying and getting ready, we trudged across the camp to the dining hall. I shuffled behind the rest and kept silent as we munched our dry scrambled eggs and stale breakfast cereal.

At first, the peace was nice, but after a few weeks, I felt my brain begin to shut down. Every day began with a prayer, then we prayed over our food before marching up to the chapel for morning service. Our afternoons were spent hiking through dried up pine trees and across cracking riverbeds, once water and now mud, like a heretical retelling of Jesus’s miracle. Sometimes we wove friendship bracelets or played kickball in the browning field. We occasionally swam in the lake, but Styrofoam cups and cigarette butts littered the rocky beach and some counselor had told a campfire story of a little boy dying from a snake bite while swimming, so the girls rarely ventured into the temporary relief of the lukewarm lake. Always, I was at the back of the line of girls hiking. I knotted the colorful string into a sloppy mess because no one would tell me how to

weave it into those beautiful bracelets. Instead of being picked last for teams, I wasn't picked at all. I doubted they would have known my name to choose me.

Inside the church, when the tall preacher man spoke out to all of us, was the only place I felt less alone. Even when I couldn't make much sense of his lessons on woman's curse or counting days in the Book of Revelations, I just listened to him speak and felt a part of something. Even when we weren't in service, I liked to meander around the chapel and look down from the top of the hill and imagine how great it must be to be God. To have so many people talking up to you all the time.

One scalding afternoon, when I was ambling through the gravel and looking up at the stain glass window above the chapel's entrance, I heard a girl shout. Thinking it was one of the girls from my cabin, I darted down a path that led back down to the shore.

"Hey wait," a smoky, almost grating, voice called after me. I turned to lock eyes with a pair of disorienting blue eyes, already searching my face as if hunting for something under my skin. She looked too young to have a voice so deep and grating, but I wasn't sure if her face was deceptively young or her voice deceptively old. "You can help me," she said.

"Help you with what?"

"I'm gonna sneak into the chapel and I need you to stand guard."

"No way," I said. I knew what my mother would say if I got caught wrapped up in something like that.

"C'mon. No one notices you much anyway so there's like no way you'd get caught. 'Sides, I see you around and you never have anything to do," she said. Then she darted back up the path and yelled for me to follow her without turning back to look at me. I trotted along behind her, and the clouds of dust we kicked up mixed together in the suffocating summer air.

"Okay now stay here," she said as she pointed to the lowest step of the entrance to the chapel. Her piercing eyes again searched my face, and I shuddered to picture my sunburnt, sweating grimace under her intense glare. "You got this."

It seemed like she was gone for an hour. The sun cooked down on me, and even the whites of my eyes felt crispened by the continuous white glare from the flour-white gravel. I paced back and forth across the front step, my assigned watch post, careful not to draw any attention, but when I saw the tall pastor sauntering up the hill, I froze. We hadn't decided a signal. If this were a movie I would caw like a bird or yell a secret safety word so she would know to hide. And if I were a better friend, I would try to stall to the tall pastor. But I just stood on the steps and held my breath.

"Excited for the next service, are ya?" he smirked at me as he strutted up the stairs. Moments later I heard him yelling, but I had already bounded back down the hill, chasing after the calming sound of the waves.

After we all took our seats for the evening service, the pastor asked me to sit in the front pew instead of the back corner, where I usually hunched away from the other kids. As I walked down the aisle toward the altar, everyone turned to watch me. The late afternoon sun barreled in through the stained glass, casting a boiling red across their cold faces.

"Greetings, brothers and sisters. Today we will be trying to enact God's teachings. We will be cleansing ourselves, unloading our souls of our sins. For we are all sinners, even young children like you are tainted by the Devil's workings. Some more than others," the pastor trailed off. A chill ran down my sweating spine. "This is Lilah, our sister in Christ. Everyone say hi."

The girl with cutting blue eyes emerged from the pastor's back room. The young congregation mumbled a vague greeting, but she never looked away from me.

"Lilah has lost her way. I've tried to help her with prayer and the Lord's word, but still she has persisted in disobedience to God. Today, I found her at the altar attempting to desecrate the holy word. I have tried to show her the path to righteousness, but I have failed her. Now I need your help. We all must pray for her and offer her our blessings. Please form a line and prepare your blessings and prayers for poor, misguided Lilah."

With vigor in their steps, the little lambs of God launched from their pews and formed a line. I stood to assume my position at the end of the line, but the pastor swiftly pointed for me to remain seated, right where Lilah could see me. The procession whispered their "blessings" into Lilah's

ear one by one, and the pastor pretended not to hear the hissing insults couched in blessings. God loves you. Worthless. Dirty. Bless your heart.

The pastor called out for the kids to lay their hands on her and call for God to help her. The campers surged toward the small girl with the raspy voice. Through the snake pit of worshipers forming around her, Lilah peered out at me with venom. I froze under her gaze and focused on my breath. *Hot air in. Hot breath out.*

Eventually Lilah collapsed, and two of the older campers carried her childlike body down to the nurse's facility. She didn't come to dinner that night, or breakfast the next morning, or any day after that. At night, in my sticky sleeping sack, I lay awake for hours, soaked in my own sweat. I woke in the mornings with images of her penetrating eyes branded behind my own eyelids. The chapel brought me no comfort, and the pastor's accusing glare seemingly always found me in the far corner, jerking me back to Lilah's cleansing.

A few days later, as I recited the morning prayer, Candy saw a puddle of my own cold piss from the night's terrors dripping down my leg and collecting around my bare feet. She called the pastor who called my mom who stormed into the office a few hours later. She found me sitting by the nurse's station, still dressed in the night's soiled clothes. She said nothing, not to me or the pastor, but just walked me back through the electric midday heat to the car, where she had laid a towel across the back seat. In the rearview mirror, I saw my own reflection, with the white gravel dust ground into my hair and sun-cracked skin, and the receding steeple, still staring down at the little town below.