

The Missionary Game

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The dead cow was what started my childhood insomnia. I laid in bed each night and watched the moon drift behind black trees, dreading the moment when I would see the strip of light under my door disappear; meaning my parents had gone to bed, meaning it was long past the time at which kids should be asleep, meaning I was not like other kids and therefore would be plagued with doubt my whole life and therefore would go to hell.

We were at the creek between two soy fields every day after school, jumping from boulders to the dried slanted banks of long grass flattened neatly as if combed over by a giant hand. We played hide-and-seek in the outer edges of the woods, wedged our bodies under fallen trees and put our faces against the smell of dirt and moss, climbed the crab apple trees and scrapped off lichen with our fingernails while waiting to be found. One day while I was seeker, I stepped on the cow.

It had been a Jersey cow, with soft tawny hide and bulging eyes, except the eyes were eaten away and its sockets stared at me as if possessed. I stepped on a hoof and as I looked down, I heard the dark hum of flies. I saw that the entire animal was falling apart in tufts. There was a sickening swelling in my throat and I willed it to freeze there.

“Do you know what hell is like?” Reverend Thomas had yelled. “We don’t like to think of hell these days. We want to think only of what makes us comfortable, what feels *good*.” He drew out the word *good*, low and rattling in his throat, as if it were stuck there and he needed to excise it slowly. “But as long as we fixate on being comfortable—“his voice was rising, his eyes widening—“we’re *destined* for hell!” *Destined* was punched into the pulpit in two swipes.

I had felt that same stirring, wanting to plug my ears to shut out the scent of hell, yet I needed to see the horrors he was describing. His words kept my body motionless, buried inside his throat. “You ever seen a rotten animal before?” He nodded his head, drawing ours along with his. He spoke softly. “Road kill, or leftover chicken that’s been in the fridge too long.” A few nervous chuckles. “Maggots everywhere, the flesh pulling apart and oozing. . .”

The rustling leaves began to drown out the flies. “Friends, there is no death in heaven. But in hell—well, everything’s death.” A few cold drops of rain fell on the Jersey, on my arms, my face, stingingly cold. The grey sky was pulling in around the cow. “Anyone here afraid of the dark? Sure—a few brave souls aren’t afraid to admit it. But can you imagine, friends, perpetual darkness, never knowing where you are, not knowing why you are feeling such *pain*, such *agony*—not even being able to see the chains which tie you down!” He sounded

so sad about this, his Jersey eyes drooping and the dry skin between them knotted.

The wind wrapped around the cow and me, pulling the scent past us quickly. The trees scraped against each other, and I could feel the branches pulling along my gut from the inside. The darkening sky was spattered with flies, blue wings through drops of rain in the air between the rotting flesh and me.

“See, we don’t want to talk about hell, or think about hell, but we’ve *got to!*” He rose on his toes to say, “Because, friends, for those of us who know God *without a doubt*, we are in his kingdom for eternity! And there will be all love and all light and all peace. But if there’s a place full of everything good and wonderful, ladies and gentlemen, there is a place entirely empty of those things as well. . .”

The first bolt of lightning drew my eyes away from the carcass. I turned around to see all the other kids running towards the house. I looked at the cow once more then ran.

It wasn’t that I didn’t believe, or that doubts constantly buzzed around my life. It was that life was an eternity long, and how could I be sure I would have no doubts between now and the end? What if I made it the whole way through and accounted regularly for my sins and didn’t embrace the

comforts of the world, only to doubt God's existence on my deathbed? For those who know God *without a doubt*.

So my parents would tuck me in at night and we would say together, "I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake," and I would mean it all, but what if I went to sleep and in a dream I doubted? After they turned out the lights I would lie there picturing hell, mad souls grabbing at my feet, pieces of my skin falling away in tufts, and yet always having more flesh to give, more organs for the maggots to infest.

"What if I go to hell?" I asked my mother after our prayers. "Felicia, why would you go to hell?" she asked. She seemed scared, or disappointed, so I just shrugged my shoulders and closed my eyes. "You won't go to hell." She kissed me on the cheek and turned out the light. I didn't know how to tell her I was afraid of doubt, didn't want her to know what my dark heart was capable of.

"It's your turn," said Jamie. We were playing The Missionary Game, which was designed like Monopoly, except that there were Providence cards instead of Chance, and Trials instead of Community Chest. "One of your supporting churches has withdrawn funds," the card I drew told me. "Give 300 dollars to the Anonymous Donor Pile." I pulled three orange bills from my stash and placed them in the middle of the board.

“Do you ever get afraid of hell?” I asked Jamie. We went to different churches, and her pastor was a slight man. I couldn’t imagine he had the strength to pound the pulpit the way Reverend Thomas did.

“No—why would I?”

“I don’t know.” I started to feel a little hot.

“Well, for other people, maybe,” she said. She drew a card and read it out loud. “‘Take your family on furlough’—ah, I hate furlough.” She dragged her pawn to the corner where it was to sit until she rolled doubles to get herself an invisible plane ticket back to the mission field. “I mean, some of my friends from school and stuff—they aren’t Christians, so that sucks. But I know I’m saved, so . . . are you going to go?”

“Where? Oh.” I jiggled the dice in my cupped hands, blew on them, and tossed them down.

“You’re saved, right?” she asked me as I pushed my pawn four spaces through deepest darkest Africa. I purchased a couple of huts and placed them in Zambia and Nigeria. “Sure. What do you mean?”

She tilted her chin downward seriously to look at me.
“You accepted Jesus into your heart, right?”

“Well, sure. He’s there.”

“How do you know? When did you ask him in?”

“I don’t know. I just, I guess I try to do the right thing and pray, and stuff.”

“Oh,” she said, leaning back a little. She put her hand on the edge of the board slowly, indicating the game was on hold. “If you don’t even know the day, you probably haven’t really done it.”

“But, I believe it all—I pray before all my meals and before I go to sleep—“

“That doesn’t really matter if you haven’t let Jesus open the door of your heart.” Her tone had suddenly changed. She was speaking with a voice I had never heard her use before. “You might pray and stuff, but how can Jesus hear you if he’s not in there?” She spoke slowly and sadly, the way Reverend Thomas spoke when he wasn’t being angry.

And it made sense. I was sweating now, and hoped she couldn’t see it forming along my forehead. I had always

thought God was everywhere, reading everyone's thoughts, seeing if they were hateful or angry or lustful or greedy. But it struck me that, if I hadn't invited Him in, God wouldn't really care what I was thinking or asking Him.

She sat there looking at me for a while from the top of her eye sockets, her lids hidden. I looked uncomfortably back and forth from her face to her hand on the board. Our two lone missionaries stood forlorn in the broad purple field of spiritual emptiness.

"Well," she finally said, "are you ready to make that decision?"

"To. . . " I wasn't sure of the answer she was looking for.

"To give your heart to Christ? I mean, Felicia, I know you're a good girl. But that's not enough to get you into heaven?"

It made sense, and I knew I should do it, but somehow there was something holding me back. If this was the missing piece, what would happen if tonight I went to bed and still couldn't sleep?

"Once," I started, "when we were playing outside, I stepped on a dead cow—"

“That’s not important right now, Felicia. Satan is bringing other thoughts into your head to distract you. You ready to do this?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Okay—give me your hand.” She reached across the open purple field, the five hundred bright bucks in the center. I tried to subtly wipe my clammy palm across my leg as I brought it to meet hers hovering above the board. She fastened her eyes shut. “Dear Jesus, we know the wages of sin is death. But you died so that we could live forever.” She squeezed my hand. “Now repeat after me. Jesus, I give you my life.”

“Jesus, I give you my life.”

“Forgive my sins.”

“Forgive my sins.”

“Amen.”

“Amen.”

I pulled my eyes open quickly, waiting for the weight of fear I'd felt across my chest to lift. She smiled at me. "Now I know we'll be in heaven together forever!"

She quickly leaned across the board to wrap her arms around me, scattering dice, pawns and multi-colored bills to all corners of the two-dimensional world.

"Hey Mom," I said the next morning while waiting for my pancakes, swinging my legs quickly and kicking the leg of the table, "I got saved."

"Oh—from what?" she said, twisting at the waist to face me, spatula poised expectantly in the air.

"You know—hell." I felt like I had sworn. Suddenly the revelation of the term washed over me—we were all in one of two camps, me and everyone else in the world, from my family and classmates to the vague tribes in *The Missionary Game*.

She watched me as if waiting for me to say more, blank plastic flipper in hand. "Yes. Yes you are." Her mouth became very small. "That's really . . . really quite wonderful! Isn't it?" Her eyebrows relaxed and her mouth drew into a tight smile.

"Ya, I guess so."

She turned back to the stove and scraped the spatula along the bottom of the cast-iron pan. The sound made me feel a little sick.

The stress of hell lifted slowly as the day went on. But during the night the cow came back, still dead and decomposing, but walking against a purple sky and carrying Reverend Thomas. He looked down at me from his seat on the cow and shook his head with tender sadness.

“Still saved?” he asked, eyebrows raised hopefully, doubtfully.

“I . . . I think so.”

“Think, or *know*?” he said deeply.

“Oh . . . know!” I sat up in bed. “Yes—I’m sure of it. I know the date—two weeks ago Saturday.”

“And the time?”

“Oh—I guess around two in the afternoon.”

He rolled his eyes and the cow scraped her hoof along the dry dirt, making the same sound as the spatula on the pan.

“Just remember,” he said in the throaty voice he used to draw out important words, “to stay that way.” The Jersey looked at me from her hollow eye sockets. Reverend Thomas wrapped his fingers around the Jersey’s naked ribs exposed through holes in her hide. He kicked her sides with his heels and chunks of fur and flesh fell away. They turned and galloped into the incoming cloud of flies.

“Stay what way?” I hollered back.

“Saved!” he shouted, and it echoed off the backs of the silent flies.

“Do you remember what time I was saved at?” I asked Jamie the next day as we paced the circumference of the schoolyard. I knew that dream-Reverend Thomas was going a little overboard, and couldn’t imagine God would ask me on Judgment Day while the heavenly projector showed footage of all the awful things I’d ever done or thought. But I thought it might be nice to know, so I could give the man an answer the next time he showed up.

“We should have looked at the clock!” she said. “Well, you came over for lunch, and we were on our second game, so it must have been, two-ish, I think?”

“Think or *know*?” I asked her under my breath. She had been the one leading the prayer so it really was her responsibility to remember.

“So are you happier now?” she asked, squeezing my elbow. “Do you feel different?”

I didn’t have the heart to answer truthfully. “I think I do, actually.”

She grinned, and I felt a little resentful about being another star in her crown. “Nothing more wonderful than one more soul in heaven, right?” She had put the strange voice on again.

“So, what happens if you stop believing?” I asked.

“You . . .” she stopped beside me, put her hand on my hanging arm. “You meant it, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I believe. It’s just . . . I don’t know the future. Like, what if I start to doubt later?”

“Oh, you won’t. Once saved, always saved.” She jumped back to a chipper pace. “Once you accept Jesus, he takes you into his fold and you’re his sheep and he won’t let you run too far away. I mean, you may do bad things and sin and stuff, but

you won't be able to leave him. You're his sheep and he'll just keep on forgiving you."

"But what if you kill someone and just . . . just stop believing anything about God, about any of this?"

"Well, then I guess you never really believed to begin with."

That night during my prayers I thought about our missionary game, how I was in Jamie's camp now, about the vulnerable little souls in my class that were going to hell. As I fell asleep Reverend Thomas came to my doorway on back of a fiery horse, dragging a golden chariot with the decaying cow in it, swinging its head back and forth. "Nothing more wonderful than one more soul in heaven!" the Reverend yelled above the crackle of horse flames. "Still hanging in there? Not a shadow of a doubt?"

"Yep—once-saved-always-saved, Reverend Thomas!" I shouted up at him.

"Oh—how about that?" he said. He punched the horse in the back and coals fell from its flanks. "Well, keep holding on, then!"

"Sure!" I said, and then quietly, "What choice do I have?"