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Baptism

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BAPTISM

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of English

Western Kentucky University

Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Mark Melloan

May 2005

BAPTISM

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Opening of childhood baptism frame—church background—hometown background—the Good Confession—home video—doubt—exploring church grounds.

Pages 1-16

II. Kelly, Bart, and Belle—Ron Davidson and church attitudes—one summer *enough for me*—the balcony—neighborhood boys and the ballpark.

Pages 17-38

III. Rusty and Roland—Eric’s baptism—Alan and *imaginary god*—summers at home and Hawk Thermoplastics—Alan and *theo-logians*—Nicole—Alan, the imam, Dr. Troughman, Curtis, and the cave—an *I love you* confession—a parking lot conversation—the backseat and Uno—a *real problem with hell*—a proposal—answers and Mary Ellen—a *veritable oak fortress*—Pampino, another aisle, and the rain—changing clothes and Mother Sophronia’s medallion.

Pages 39-82

IV. Nashville—wedding—*never in my plan*—Hayden—the Fitz brothers leaving early—grieving parents—Roland’s song—sparse—whispers.

Pages 83-89

V. Baptism.

Pages 90-91

BAPTISM

Mark Melloan

April 2005

91 pages

Directed by Dale Rigby, Tom Hunley, and James Flynn

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

One of my favorite movie characters said he'd worn lots of shoes, meaning he'd been a great many places and done a great many things. Well, I've never been to war or run across America or founded a shrimp company or shook the President's hand or returned kickoffs for the University of Alabama. But I did grow up in a church, come of age, and stay there, which is perhaps as interesting.

I am now a husband, worship leader, singer-songwriter, and college writing instructor, struggling to capture fragments of who I was before I was any of these things, and hoping to shed some light on how I came to be who I am today.

If you need the entirety of the story, read no further. But if a few scenes will do for now, in a brief Master's Thesis, then by all means...

*Faith, doubt, commitment—I have cupped my hand, dipped, tasted.
I have been immersed in such waters.*

For Nicole,

I am glad we lament that the angels do not marry,

but gladder we will both be there.

I.

I was baptized after giving the Good Confession in front of the entire congregation. I was nine, blonde-haired and straight-toothed. I didn't need braces or to study, my only innate weakness a matter of inches and pounds. My church shoes were planted lightly on crimson carpet. Not the penny loafers my mother had once spray-painted white to match a ring-bearer tuxedo. These were the flat, leather Eastlands, untied, crisp coils of shoelace guarding each tongue. I stood between "This do in remembrance of me" etched on an oak communion table and the first pew, hymnals and Bibles tucked underneath. Three parallel columns of oak pews, twenty rows deep, men's ties and women's buttons afront—and their wearers more heavily concentrated two-thirds of the way back—the room observed, and perhaps smiled in approval.

Nanny, my father's widowed mother, was there. She drove thirty miles north from Horse Cave in a lime green LTD to witness my conversion and was sitting beside

me, fourth pew center. Our Christian Church legacy came down through her family, the Mousers, German immigrants who thought Kentucky was far enough West and settled in the Bible-based upshot of Barton Stone's Restoration Movement. Three denominations would come down to us from this movement: Christian Churches (DOC—Disciples of Christ), Churches of Christ, and independent Christian Churches, like us. Unlike today's DOC churches, Churches of Christ and independent Christian Churches are still congregational, meaning no off-campus authority, no hierarchy, exerts influence over our church. We're also fundamentalist, although that word has taken a beating of late, and deservedly so. A staunch Kentucky Church of Christ, for example, will reject the use of instruments in their worship services, frowning, or worse, condemning their use in other churches' worship, because musical instruments, although encouraged in the Psalms, aren't specifically prescribed by the New Testament. Which I suppose would indicate that such Churches of Christ not only claim to practice *sola scriptura*—"scripture alone"—but *sola* New Testament. Steeples, not mentioned in either testament, top a long list contradicting this claim. Independent Christian churches are fundamentalist in the sense that we idealize the first century church, which is nice, and generally ignore centuries of saints, creeds, and schisms, which is convenient—we don't have to explain Papal sin and the Crusades. In our church, authority isn't Roman. It's Zondervan, a Michigan publishing house. Authority isn't a product of the Vatican. It's a product of Grand Rapids, or Nashville, or any other place that's printing what seems a faithful English translation of the Bible.

In a good Christian church—which sometimes we are and sometimes we aren't—there is ongoing conversation on interpretive matters, some room to breathe. Our musical

instruments, at best, sound chords of difference from the aforementioned Church of Christ mindset. At worst, they sound a single note of doctrinal discord. But it's where I grew up, and contrary to all our primitivist assumptions, things are getting better.

Our senior pastor, Carroll Knight, is tall, and his hair taller, and his glasses square, and his demeanor stiff. There's relief in stories about his childhood, growing up poor in Eastern Kentucky, his father building fires in the woods to give him stopping places, moments of warmth on the long trail home. There's relief in stories about his son, asleep in the shower and late for school. There's relief in the photograph that hangs in his office: a sunset over Lake Michigan, his wife, two daughters, and son splashing a few yards out, and him watching from the shore, back towards the camera, hands on hips, bare feet in the sand. But beneath that photograph, he is the senior pastor, and he sits behind a desk. Even in casual conversation, his deep voice condemns homosexuality and televangelism. Worse, his eyes do not trust. You are either a heretic ("liberal theologian" is a euphemism), or worse, a conspirator out to locate his replacement.

"Biblical authority" is his catch-phrase. If we asked C. S. Lewis—the great Anglican—"what is the word of God?" he would answer with another question: "You mean *who* is the Word of God?" directing you to the first chapter of John's Gospel.

In the beginning was the Word.

The Word was with God and the Word was God.

The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.

Ask our senior pastor the same question we put to C. S. Lewis, and he'll immediately say the Bible. Both answers are orthodox, but I must admit I'm more comfortable with someone whose first response is *Jesus*. Ask Lewis about salvation and he'll tell you

about Jesus, the Savior—not to mention Creator and theme of the divine library of Scripture. And to be fair, these days, Pastor Knight does the same. But there was a day, I'm afraid, when he might gloss over that fairly significant step and start talking about how wet you need to get. Those who stay near and dear to Barton Stone and his idealization of the first-century church revere a particular New Testament verse: Acts 2:38.

What must we do to be saved? Repent and be baptized, all of you.

* * *

Until two years ago, Elizabethtown was a dry community. Kentucky still has those, “dry counties,” places where prohibition didn't quite end. For years, you could drink liquor legally, in your home, or closet perhaps, but you'd have to drive a winding road north to Flaherty or northeast to Lebanon Junction to buy it. Reverend Kackel of Elizabethtown's Church of Christ told a News-Enterprise reporter his stance on the pending wet-dry vote in no uncertain terms: “Drink in moderation. Lie in moderation. Steal in moderation. Fornicate in moderation.” I was sitting in our kitchen, brimming each square of my waffle with maple syrup when Mom read it aloud blankly. Then I asked for the paper and read it too, in black and white. “Yeah, makes sense. Drink in moderation—Murder in moderation.” It was easier to think in black and white. I approved the quote and took the paper to Dad, who was heading up the promotional campaign for the dry side. He wrote pamphlets, conceived newspaper ads, directed television commercials, and produced radio blurbs, which is why I was really surprised by the pained expression he made: “We'll lose if we say it like that.”

Fourth period, I sat behind Reverend Kackel's daughter, Priscilla, a very thin blonde girl with John Lennon's eyeglasses but almost certainly none of his recordings. Our always coach, occasional American History teacher, was occupying us with holy things while he designed an offense for Bardstown's three-two zone: "Discussion groups. The flag, the pledge, prayer in school." It is the conversation that keeps God safely distant and us wandering in pious delusions. We would've been nearer Him had I known to ask Priscilla about childhood acts of cruelty. Why, when April's forehead broke out in the seventh grade, did she tell her, my unknissed sweetheart of three years, that I didn't think she was pretty any more and was going to break up with her? And why, her eleven and Nicole eight, did she drag my future wife out of her Sunday School classroom to make fun of her little white dress? Nicole's family did not last long at that church.

Her dad, Dr. Tom, is a family practitioner who lost his own father at eight and his mother at nineteen, a generous patron of my songwriting career who gave me a thousand-dollar check for my first recording project (assuring me it was not a dowry). He is a stoic genius who smiles at home and tries to in public, a man of soul and body older than his years, but when he volunteered to teach a Sunday School class, he was absurdly asked to sign a document that condemned any and all drinking of alcohol. He would not sign. The family came to our church, the more *liberal* denomination. Alas, perspectives mystify. Tom's favorite joke is the one with the windowless room in heaven: St. Peter cracks the door open to let you peek inside, putting his finger to his lips and whispering, "And *these* are the Church of Christers—they think they're the only ones here."

After Priscilla and I agreed that we should pledge under God often, and pray to God oftener, I asked if her church really thought they were the only ones going to heaven.

“Just do what the Bible says,” she answered.

So I figured I was okay.

Because when our preacher asked everyone to stand for the invitation hymn, I had stood. I had made my way to the front.

* * *

*Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.*

After the first verse, I stepped into the aisle and slipped to the front. Nanny would have been smiling. I’m sure of it. But, at the time, I don’t remember seeing her face. I only remember my church shoes, planted lightly on crimson carpet. Line by line, I repeated my father. “I believe.” “I believe.” “That Jesus is the Christ.” “That Jesus is the Christ.” “The Son of the living God.” “The Son of the living God.” And with an anxiety perhaps not unlike Simon Peter’s (in Matthew 16:16, Peter gives the first such confession), I had made the Good Confession before God and man. I had declared the very “marrow and fatness of the Gospel,” to quote D. S. Burnet, another great nineteenth-century Restorationist, a man whose personality—if not his stature—was perhaps akin to that of Reverend Carroll Knight. According to Burnet, an apostate Presbyterian who found no scriptural backing for christening nor creed, the Good Confession has eight principle attributes, four of which are: “that *Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God* is the creed and foundation of the primitive church”; that “the Good Confession is the most liberal confession of faith on record” (he explains: “There is nothing intricate in it.

It involves the great fact of the Bible, the central truth of the whole revelation”); that “Christ made the Good Confession before the Jewish high-priest and Sanhedrin, during the administration of Pontius Pilate, and died for the making of it”; and that “All men will be compelled to confess Christ at the close of this dispensation.”

* * *

A video camera in our church’s balcony broadcasts the services real-time to nursery workers two floors down. Of course, a live feed doesn’t require actual taping—we could just run the camera, sans-tape, sending the signal to them. But then there would be no record, no preservation, no way to contrast present and past, revering either one or the other—never both. So decades of video are piled in corners, stacked on shelves, or perhaps lost in private family collections, stacked between *Myrtle Beach* and *Mark with Bosnian refugees on WAVE 3 News*, labeled *Mark Christmas Program* (I soloed “Good Things Come in Little Packages” in a gift-box with arm-holes) or *Mark Baptism*.

For years, my father’s occupation was video-production. He produced commercials for Swope Toyota, tourism films for the state of Kentucky, a music video for some con named Deborah Duty who never anted up, and industrial training videos for AP Technoglass and Dana Corporation. It wasn’t uncommon to see my parents smiling in commercials broadcast all over Kentucky and southern Indiana from Louisville stations like WAVE, WHAS, and WDRB. My mother was a tall blonde with fair complexion, Native American cheeks—come down through the Nunns—and gospel eyes. Dad had parted brown hair, a sturdy Irish nose—come down through the Melloans—and a reliable mustache, complete with broadcaster smile. The first photograph taken after they said their vows hangs in their bedroom today—young faces, smiling at each other,

arms interlocked, stepping in union, the cross that hung on the church's front wall perfectly centered between their shoulders. And Amanda and I, "gifted and talented" by Elizabethtown City Schools standards, blonde-haired and smiles to boot, were the fruit of this union, two outgoing children who would make our own TV appearances, modeling khakis and polo shirts. Eventually, we'd grow up, develop some character, and surround my parents' wedding portrait with two of our own, same pose—Amanda and James, Mark and Nicole—and crosses in the background of each, just not as well centered. The positioning in Mom and Dad's wedding shot is really uncanny.

But for all of Dad's professional videorecording, we have little to no home video, none of my little league ball games, none of me just rocking in my little red chair and saying funny things. We just have a few hours of me, adolescent, and Amanda, post-adolescent and self-conscious at Myrtle Beach, which wasn't really a regret until I discovered my wife's family video collection: hours of her tiny puckered face, porch light glowing behind wisps of curly brown hair, her swinging, and singing

Deep and wide, deep and wide, there's a fountain flowing deep and wide

Hmmm and wide, hmmm and wide, there's a fountain flowing hmmm and wide...

or rocking on a wooden horse

Cast your net on the other si – eede

Cast your net on the other si – eede

Cast your net on the other si – eede

Out in the deep blue sea.

And her little brother, then two, mumbling from the deep recesses of his Halloween costume, "I'm a pumkin."

We don't have that kind of stuff. We have *Mark Baptism*.

But I'm thankful for it. It's evidence. I'll take it to Peter, who everyone knows is standing at the pearly gates with a set of keys

I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

There you go, plain as day. We'll cue up the tape while everyone in line behind me waits, tapping their feet and looking at their watches. He'll see that I made the Good Confession; I'll find out firsthand how shaky *his* voice was when he made the very first Good Confession. He'll see that I was walked into deep baptismal waters; he'll admit he walked across and nearly sunk into such waters. Then he'll say "Come on in" while we share a chuckle and he searches his keyring for the one labeled *main gate*. Oh, and what a sigh of relief I'll breathe when those gates swing wide, without a squeak.

* * *

I first confessed my doubt when I was sixteen. I was down front in the Methodist sanctuary on a kneeler during one of the dim-lit closing ceremonies of Chrysalis—a seasonal retreat for high-schoolers from various local denominations, and the rare occasions of my own teenage piety. Kent, the youth pastor at Elizabethtown's non-denominational church, Heartland Faith Fellowship, finished praying with a kid who had been crying over deeds done in the dark with his girlfriend. Kent patted him on the back and sent him back to the pews, then he came and knelt by me. I was trembling.

"He forgives."

I nodded in agreement, not lifting my eyes.

"Yes, he has forgiven you, Mark."

Now, I did look up at him. He was gazing at the metal cross on the brick wall above the stage.

“No, I know. I’m just—struggling to believe it all.”

He was a drummer and a mountain biker who drove a Jeep and listened to John Fogerty and the Dave Matthews Band, but he always wore his robes when performing marriages and could be very priestly if need be. He put his arm around me.

“Can I pray for you, Mark?”

He asked God to bless me. He thanked God for the depth of my faith, which was revealing itself through doubt. Amen. That was it. He smiled at me with watery eyes and patted me on the back. But he didn’t offer me any instruction, direct me to biblical occasions of doubt, like Peter’s feet beginning to sink into the waters of Galilee. And although he didn’t instruct me to ask forgiveness, and didn’t even mention that doubt was a sin, I had a feeling. Doubt was unfaithfulness, an adultery of sorts.

My parents once gave the ‘marriage talk’ at Chrysalis. Uniquely, there was no pre-marital sex, promiscuity, cheating, drugs, or alcohol in their narrative. Most couples who gave the marriage talk told tales of waywardness—pre-marital conceptions, adulteries, divorce, remarriage—and then the journey home to Jesus. But my parents’ story begins at home with Jesus and stays there. I know because I know them, and because I watched their marriage talk on video the night before my own marriage. They stood side by side at a wooden lectern in front of a *Chrysalis 22: Christ is Counting on You* banner. Mom held up photographs of Dad, who had wavy blonde hair that soon turned brown, then gray, and now white. She told us about his cool hand on a Hart County High locker. Dad talked about Mom, who wore brown and white saddleshoes

and had an FHA book pressed against the green HC on her cheerleader cardigan. Soon, they held up the wedding portrait and talked about commitment, how they didn't know what they were getting into when they married, Dad twenty, Mom seventeen, but they knew there was no turning back. Divorce was the d-word, to be uttered only in the gravest of circumstances, and even then, only about another unfortunate couple, and not themselves.

After Mom and Dad finished, the teenagers gave a standing ovation. As my parents smiled and gathered their props, I paused them. Even then, a cross hung in the background between their shoulders.

I took the cassette out and put in *Mark Baptism*. It was grainy. And Dad was a little nervous, one hand holding a microphone, the other gentle on my back, and my voice so small, with more Kentucky in it than I would've guessed.

But I did say it, and I seemed sincere, if a bit young.

* * *

At few places do intensity and absurdity collide with such force: plastic soccer players—armless, skewered through the midsection with a silver rod—lunging backwards, feet slamming into a dense white ball. Foosball tables seem to occupy the entire spectrum of social venues. In college, I'd watch Pi Kappa Alpha foos-enthusiasm beside a friend, himself a Pike, himself always enthusiastic. We shook our heads at the rod-spinners, illustrious spinners of foos rods, spinners of drunken vigor beneath a frat house's leaky roof. Later, I and this same friend, also a jazz pianist, would offer audience to the Schillings, blues bar musicians by night, teenagers by day, and foosian aesthetes in their Homestead Court living room. At Broadway United Methodist's youth house, we

would route for the two-kid teams trying to beat my buddy Ben, who used just one hand, but still won every time.

I remember the old rec room at First Christian. There was a dartball board in the corner. It had an aerial view of a baseball field painted on it, the cork section about five feet in diameter—about the same size of the stained glass medallion in the sanctuary behind the baptistery. When slow-pitch softball players got bad knees, they graduated to the indoor, laughing variety of America's greatest pastime. Too old to run around in circles but too young to miss out on friendly competition with area churches, they met weekly in the rec room, opening with prayer.

No darts were available when we occupied the rec room; we were left to stare at the big board, examine the holes, and suspect that the game was a lot of fun. There was, however, a ping-pong table folded up by another wall. No paddles that I remember; just a crumpled ping-pong ball that we would toss into the foosball table and kick around. Disappointingly, it wouldn't roll. It just slid. But since we could hardly see over the sides of the table, I don't guess it mattered much.

Gregg Parson used to have a full head of red hair and a thick mustache, just slightly darker. He was certainly not as good an administrator as he is now that he runs the Family Life Center. But, when we had only two buildings, there was perhaps less administrating to be done. There was the red-brick Parthenon and its main sanctuary. There was the thick concrete floor beneath that sanctuary, designed in the fifties to make a bomb shelter of the basement below. And there was the two-story annex, a red-brick cube added to the back in 1976 that we still call the education building. It was connected to the main building by a breezeway—two classrooms and a hall with giant windows.

These windows are perfect for pressing your hands and open mouth against while watching the cars pass underneath, but the structure is impossible to heat and cool.

Down in the education building, first floor, opposite the old rec room, was the chapel, a miniature of the main sanctuary. The generation who built our church only knew how to do church one way, so the chapel was very piously christened “the chapel” and had two of its own pew-columns, parallel, stretching from one end of the forty-by-twenty foot room to the other. A piano in the corner. A wooden lectern at the helm. It was perfect for junior church.

Gregg led junior church. Eric and Mike Fitz and I could typically stay seated in the pews and pay attention. He made more sense than Carroll Knight. He called the church a baseball team with lots of different positions and roles, but none to spare. He said we should encourage each other and consider others better than ourselves—no one likes a showboat. And he said everyone ought to get to play, so we should invite our friends to come be on our team. Then he talked about choosing teams. How many of us had done that before? Most everyone raised their hand. How did we think it felt to be picked last, or not at all? We were all pretty quiet. And he let us be so.

Gregg said no one actually deserved to be on God’s team, but that Jesus—even knowing that we’d drop fly balls, bobble grounders, and strike out a lot—wanted to let us play anyway. In fact, He’d taken Himself out of the game so that we could play. Now, He’s on the sidelines, our Coach and greatest Fan, cheering us on.

The Lord seemed kind of stiff and scary when Reverend Knight talked about Him. In fact, He seemed a lot like Reverend Knight. But when Gregg taught us, Jesus seemed like a pretty good sport. You wanted to be on His team.

“I’m going to give everyone a small sheet of paper and a pencil. I want you to write the name of your best friend on it and fold it up.”

We wrote covertly and folded.

“Okay. Take a little while to think to yourself. And be honest. Would you give up your own life for the person on that little sheet of paper?”

Twenty children sat quietly in pews, looking down at scraps of paper.

“Who’d you write?” Eric asked me.

“You.”

“Me too.”

But I hadn’t really. I had written *Kevin*, a Louisville native whose dad cussed, rented us *The Fabulous Baker Boys*, and drove us up I-65 to see the Pegasus Parade among other pre-Derby festivities. Before you can truly love, a relationship is an entirely different commodity: Is his neighborhood more exciting than mine? Does he have more and better video games than me? And soon enough, does he get his driver’s license before I do? Years after junior church and Gregg’s red hair, bound by an interest in unholy substances I figured Kevin had personally introduced to our small town, Eric and Kevin would become best friends. I don’t know if that meant Eric would die for Kevin, but in a chapel pew, Kevin’s name on a tiny sheet of paper, I figured I would. Because that was the right answer. And I wanted to be a good sport, like Jesus.

I remember practicing my favorite church pastime, Spiderman-Tunneling, in the chapel. Sometimes crawling beneath an entire pew-column, front to back, was too trying in the main sanctuary. I’d get claustrophobic and give up, perhaps popping up in the middle of a post-service conversation. But the chapel was nice training ground, the pew-

columns being a good deal shorter. On one horrific occasion, I made it under three pews and happened upon an abandoned pile of toenails.

Kum Join Us, an aged Sunday School class in the severest sense (and perhaps the reason you don't attend a church), also used the chapel for their Sunday School classroom. It was their meeting ground, furnished with piano, hymnal racks on the back of each pew, and up front, a glamour portrait of Jesus, shoulders up. He has groomed shoulder-length hair, blue eyes, and a head that tilts slightly back. Recently, responding to an elder who griped that communion-meditators—men who deliver a brief message on Christ's sacrifice before praying over the stacked golden plates housing the emblems—should never ascend the stage underdressed, I considered scanning the print digitally to outfit Jesus in coat and tie. That I didn't follow through was indeed a matter of conscience—I couldn't justify the level of time and detail required to fully wallop the comedic nerve. At any rate, some Kum Join Us woman, clipping her toenails between reverent glances at Christ, who Himself was gazing somewhere up and to the left, taught me the meaning of a dirty floor, whereupon I gave up Spiderman-Tunneling.

One could also Just-Plain-Spiderman by crawling face-first down the stairs that led up to the balcony. I didn't give up Just-Plain-Spidermanning until one day I was almost to the bottom of the stairs and noticed a lot of dress shoes milling around in the lobby. It was a fleeting moment of natural revelation. It wasn't the voice of God; it was the voice of reason, momentarily making a suggestion I could hear. In that moment, I discerned the meaning of *ridiculous*, whereupon I gave up Just-Plain Spidermanning.

Only recently have the pews been removed from the chapel and replaced by padded chairs, turned sideways and angled toward the center. Dr. Tom, now an elder in

our church, has some semicircular space within which to facilitate the Alpha Class.

Everyone's closer, and facing each other for the most part. It's obviously an improvement. All the same, I signed up for one of the old pews when I saw in the church newsletter that they were being removed. I figure I'll use it in my music room, when I have one. Just three more pews and I'll be able to make a square. We'll hold our instruments, face each other—in a reverent way, of course—then I'll count off.

II.

We'd been talking on the cordless phone long enough that it was starting to get hot against my ear. I asked her what she wanted me to say, though I already knew. Weeks prior, she established that a guy should know if he's in love after a few months of dating. If he didn't know by then, he never would. She sat silent on the other end.

"That's hard," I whispered.

Just months earlier, she had been the future wife of my preacher's son.

Carroll and Alexis Knight had given their only son the name Barton, after the great Restorer himself. I know little about Mr. Stone, but based on his Restorationist stance, it seems I honor his memory by skipping it. I prefer to think that, in the early nineteenth century, this Presbyterian pastor decided denominational lines had gone too far, too many divisions over petty differences. So what we needed to do was *restore* the New Testament church, return to the church of the apostles, back *before* denominations

(although I'm not sure when that was). But I'm sure the movement was less ecumenical, and more a rejection of centuries of Church waywardness. It was Kentucky's Protestant Reformation and the rest of Christendom an Unholy Roman Empire of sorts. That said, we do have a gracious motto—not a creed, of course: “We're Christians only, but not the only Christians.” Not Catholics, not Methodists, not Baptists, just Christians.

“DOC?” the college recruiter from Transylvania would say, his eyes lighting up.

“No, congregational.”

Whatever the case, in good Protestant fashion, Mr. Stone's non-denominationalism really meant marking off yet another denominational line, the Restoration churches.

Our Bart didn't set out to restore Christendom to Apostolic unity. But he did play a mean saxophone. On a couple of occasions, he sat in with the praise band. We were packing up after Wednesday night rehearsal in the sanctuary when he told me he wasn't taking Kelly to Belle. I clicked shut each latch on my guitar case and stood. Belle was the annual high school formal on a Louisville riverboat, and now that Bart was collegiate, he'd outgrown it.

“But she still wants to go,” he told me.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, I'll take her.”

“Yeah, do, ask her.”

Kelly Noel grew up Catholic but started coming to First Christian with Bart. Disciplined, friendly, wise from her parents divorce, her father's alcohol, her step-

father's post-it-notes on the bathroom mirror: *Kelly, please turn on the fan when you take a shower. You're ruining the wallpaper.*

"It's ugly wallpaper anyway," she lamented, "like a briarpatch."

She had straight, blonde hair to her shoulders, unbleached and shiny, often up in an unkempt *Noel-Knot*. Her face was pure, no make-up. She liked being pretty without trying. She was a year my elder.

Belle night, I drove a four-cylinder Toyota to her little brick house, pulled up her steep, concrete driveway on time, knocked, and shook her stepfather's hand, making a special effort to look him in the eyes. My father hadn't prepared me for a man of weak handshakes and a nervous eye. I had thought, until that moment, I would always be on the smaller end of a handshake, and I was disappointed, my nerves a waste, the moment somehow wrong. Kelly walked into the living room, smile fourteen, eyes nineteen, and a body perhaps the right age—I was making every effort to keep my eyes locked on hers. Only later, in photographs, did I feel at ease to examine her little dress, black, cut four inches above knees turned faintly inward on high heels, and a baby blue stripe around her chest. She was petite and bare-shouldered.

Soon, it was the top deck of Louisville's Belle, us leaning over the rail, headlights steady across the bridge, southern lights and northern clouds, a dance on the black waters of the Ohio, her laughing, and the wheel churning the river behind us.

I'd never dressed so handsomely, J. Riggings tweed blazer, black slacks, brown pattern tie, dark saddle oxfords. I'd never opened and shut the passenger door so gently and frequently—Dad had reminded me to do so on the way out the door with her corsage. I'd never driven so smoothly, left hand on top of the steering wheel, right hand casually

to the bottom of the wheel when I needed to signal. I'd never stayed out so late with permission. We went back to her friend Blythe's house on Mayapple Lane, cobblestone fireplace and big black windows—the trio arrangement our only excuse for three o'clock laughter—at times, a quartet: Blythe's mother occasionally stepped in, sleepily asking if we'd like a Sprite. It was all very innocent, Kelly's finger all the while in the pre-engagement ring of my preacher's son.

I'd never stood at a girl's back porch four hours past midnight. I'd never not kissed a girl in this circumstance. I'd never kissed a girl in this circumstance either. And I didn't kiss her then. I just paused momentarily, delayed goodnight, created a lovely awkwardness. She would know me too much a man to kiss another's betrothed.

Blythe called the next day with good news. After I hung up, I was to wait by the phone for another call. And I didn't have to wait long. It was Kelly.

A week after Belle, Kelly and I came home from our second date to find Bart on her front step, sitting alone in the dark. I wasn't scared, just creeped out. He stood up slowly, pushing on his knees as they unfolded and mumbling, "We need to talk," without clearing his throat. He should've cleared his throat. Something in there needed shaking loose. Moments later, in her basement, Bart sat in the chair across from us on the couch and tried to be a good listener: "Kelly, I need to know your side of all this."

After a long silence, she began to explain that she hadn't intended for anything to happen, that things had just changed. She glanced at me as she said the second part. Then there was another long silence. The air conditioner kicked on, offering us some relief. I was staring at the floor, letting them both say what they needed to say, and feeling a bit like the third wheel. Then Kelly looked up at him and said that she hadn't

cheated on him, and that she needed him to know that. As soon as those words escaped her mouth, he leaned forward in exasperation and opened his palms—“But cheating isn’t always physical.” It had merit, but it was spoken too soon. He wasn’t listening anymore, and before he knew it, he was disputing that one night of fun on a riverboat wasn’t much, was nothing at all.

After that, Kelly said little, mentioned that I opened car doors for her.

“What about us, Mark? What about our friendship?”

The harsh reality: we had not been friends. I had three recollections of Bart:

1. Him madly clutching the wheel of a go-cart outside the Thule’s giant garage, a warehouse called the *Thule-Dome*. It housed an indoor basketball court and a pontoon boat (the propeller of which I’d cut my knee on that summer, Kelly then helping me out of the water and up the bank). Tommy Thule said, “Go!” and Bart put the pedal to the medal, driving head-on into the *Thule-Dome*’s brick wall and bloodying his nose.

2. Mom and I dropping food by their house on Dudley Lane because Alexis was having a spell with her bad back. Bart showed me his laser disc collection—holographic disks now comically large next to CDs and DVDs.

3. The costume he wore to a church Halloween party—his body in a big box and tablecloth, and on its top a silver platter, and on that platter Bart’s bloody head. Not, perhaps, the most tasteful rendering of John the Baptist I’ve seen. None of these memories matched up with the solemn Bart who sat before us.

“Bart, this isn’t about us,” I said.

“Then what is it?”

“I think you’ve got one person to blame.” He had put her finger in a promise-ring, gone to the community college to stay close, lapsed into regular movie-renting. He always put his key in the driver’s side door. She would win nearly every scholarship awarded at the 1998 Honors Night. Glittery make-up and angelic hair, she would direct the EHS marching band to two national titles. By twenty-five, she’d be illegally preaching the Gospel in China. Kelly was on her way somewhere. Bart was too, he just didn’t know it yet.

“Mark, can Kelly and I talk alone?” It was past midnight now, her eyes distant, her lips a lovely defiance. With Bart alone in his chair, holding the jack of spades and an UNO card, I left pretty confident.

Kelly’s transition from the preacher’s son to the elder’s son, though it sounds pretty scandalous, didn’t really cause much of a stir; just among the youth, who undoubtedly noticed marked improvement in my attendance of youth functions—Kelly never missed. Soon, Kelly was baptized by full immersion and joined our church officially. But I can claim no part in that. When she told me she wanted to be baptized, I suggested that a dip in the pool at E’town Swim and Fitness Center would do the trick. I had already been baptized. I could afford to be unorthodox.

Bart sat in the congregation and watched his almost-wife confess Christ and be baptized by his father, who was even now putting a folded handkerchief to her mouth and leaning her back. I sat on the stage, guitar in hand.

* * *

Ron Davidson brought guitars and a drumset into the First Christian Church sanctuary, and with them, a congregational emotion ranging from elation to disgust.

Dad was chairman of the Elders' board, our church's youngest chairman, to date. We had just wrapped up a major stewardship push, the finale of which was called *Incredible Day*. While parsimonious old women stood up during post-service congregational meetings asking Dad—who stood alone at the lectern—to show them a “gold mine,” a giant pink elephant stood in the front yard, in the shadow of the flagpole, with “Something big is happening at First Christian” painted on its torso.

We raised 875,364 dollars and built the Family Life Center, dark gray brick and darker aluminum siding—not extravagant, not offensive—situated just behind the education building. The FLC featured a gymnasium, an elevated walking track, several multipurpose rooms, an industrially-outfitted kitchen, and a new, improved rec room. Gregg's office was just outside this rec room, and soon he'd be overseeing fitness classes, area basketball tournaments, daycare, preschool and kindergarten classes—all of which fell under the banner of what we now call *relevant environments*, environments that matter to people from all walks of life, and different walks of faith and unfaith. *Relevant environments* are a much better evangelistic tool than, say, megaphones. When we built the FLC, we also transformed the *abandon hope, ye who enter here* staircase that led up to the sanctified heights of our main building into a green, sloping front lawn and automotive ramp. The folks who now make the most use of that ramp are the very ones who opposed its construction (the ramp being too costly and likely to ruin our church's stately exterior).

We finally had pool tables in a church building you didn't break a sweat climbing into. For years, foos had been the closest thing we had to a relevant environment, which was unfortunate, because foos isn't good for talking—too much lunging for handles, too

many cries of astonishment. Pool, on the other hand, is perfect for talking. In fact, if any table game takes up residence in the shadow of a steeple, it really ought to be pool.

Decide casually who will break. Say a few words while you're chalking your stick. One crummy shot and the eight ball drops too soon. Say that's just the way it goes sometimes. Say it's a bit like life. Make mention of guitars and drums that now occupy the sanctuary, the gradual disappearance of inexplicable oak barriers.

When Ron Davidson was recruited to lead worship, my parents were more excited than they were during the pre-FLC stewardship push. They were even more excited than they were on *Incredible Day*. For weeks, they reminisced on recording studios and gospel music concerts, Mom alto, Dad bass, Ron on guitar, Lynette singing various parts and shaking a tambourine.

Mom and Dad's non-ecclesiastic doings were the band Southwest and the Lincoln Jamboree. Mom sang Roy Orbison's *That Lovin' You Feelin' Again* as duet with Rick Cherlton—then a member of my parents' Sunday School class, the Crusaders, later a divorcee and rambler. Joel-Ray, the Lincoln Jamboree's owner, babysat Amanda, her fascinated by his life-sized wooden Indian. I, inside my mother, needed no babysitting.

Ron and Lynette's musical pursuits were perhaps higher profile: jazz bass and tuxedo for receptions in Louisville's Seelbach; oboe and black dress for the Louisville Orchestra's *Pops in the Park*. Saturday night in the world and Sunday night at the helm of Christ's body had been their practice for years, until Ron fell ill with colon cancer. His oldest son, Matt, gave up showing saddlebreds to focus on music and be home more; his youngest son, a spiky blonde-headed Luke—over a decade later in the coming—took to drums (and violin, to satisfy the more collared aspects of the familial legacy). Ron,

once a hot commodity among Kentucky Christian churches, was out of service. There would be chemotherapy, and time to regroup. And then the phone ringing.

They'd migrate here for band practice on Wednesday nights, head back up I-65, migrate yet again for two Sunday morning services, then head home. Dad tried to get them to move to E'town permanently, but they insisted on teaching music in Louisville, an attachment to the world I've grown to understand. Dad later pointed out that they would have to stop gigging if they moved to E'town—no music scene, or perhaps, for Ron and Lynette, no mission field.

My first encounter with the Davidsons was nothing short of an awakening. I ascended the balcony stairs and looked down upon a smiling acoustic guitarist with curly gray hair and a mustache. Mike Fitz was already up there watching—he nudged me and whispered, “That’s gonna be you some day.” Ron was strumming a black Takamine and leading the congregation in *Revive Us Again*—it was an old hymn, but it was rearranged, and its more profound lyrical sentiments were not lost on anyone. To Ron’s right, Lynette swayed tall, playing an electric keyboard in Linda McCartney fashion. She had long black hair and sang in a way that conveyed genuine interest in the proceedings. To Lynette’s right, Matt wore a bass guitar high, almost like a giant charm on a leather necklace, but he played it professionally, casually lifting his eyes from his fingers to sing along. And to Matt’s right was the ghost of things to come. The second week Ron led, it was Luke, and a drumset, God forbid.

Praise Him with the clash of cymbals;

praise Him with resounding cymbals.

Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.

But Hayden Vicks will live forever. He has a shiny, bald head, a pointy nose, brutally-square glasses, and a wife named Martha who used to put Amanda in a playpen and throw a blanket over the top of it if she cried. The elders' hands, my father's included, once prayed Hayden back from the dead in a Hardin Memorial Hospital room. Prayed him back, it seems, so that he could lead against Ron a veritable faction of the gray-haired and watery-eyed. I love Hayden, but we don't celebrate his resurrection in any sort of Easter ascension glory. By that, I mean you'll never see Hayden's feet, sandal-clad, dangling from the ceiling of our sanctuary while a fog machine coughs and the choir sings "He's Alive!"

After we graduated from the nursery and Martha Vicks, we children sat Indian-style and sang in the fellowship room, below the sanctuary, below the thick concrete,

I don't wanna be a hyp – o – crite.

I don't wanna be a hyp – o – crite.

'Cause a hypocrite ain't hip – with – it.

I don't wanna be a hyp – o – crite.

I don't wanna be a Sadd – u – cee.

I don't wanna be a Sadd – u – cee.

'Cause a Sadducee is sad – you – see.

I don't wanna be a Sadd – u – cee.

I don't wanna be a Phar – i – see.

I don't wanna be a Phar – i – see.

'Cause a Pharisee ain't fair – you – see.

I don't wanna be a Phar – i – see.

The Pharisees were the zealous faction of Jews who took Jesus to the Romans; they were zealous for the traditions of their fathers. I think it doesn't take long to become zealous for the traditions. I think it doesn't matter the tradition.

A few months after Ron came, during which time he taught me a lot about bass and electric guitar and added me to the praise band—now called *Matthew, Mark, Luke and Ron* in jest—he left. Just like that. He didn't mention Hayden, Kum Join Us, the Pharisees. He didn't mention anything really, just the stress of traveling and the lease on his car. But watery eyes over a smiling mustache, now grayer and weary of controversy, told a different story.

He told me, then fifteen and holding a yellow electric guitar, “Mark, you've got to keep the flame alive, buddy.”

Mark Hardin, lead singer of The Hardin Brothers (a gospel quartet in which Mark's twin brothers sang tenor and baritone and my father sang bass) and probably the man I was named after, was known and loved by our congregation for years. He would lead worship now. Most everyone in the pews had their three releases: *Standing Together, Father's Love*, and *The Hardin Brothers Christmas*. And although most of their songs were old classics rearranged or Oak Ridge Boys covers, Dad wrote one I'll always remember

*Brothers and friends, we're gonna sing about Jesus,
praise the Messiah each day.*

*Brothers and friends, we're gonna tell the sto – ry
by loving each other, it's – God's way.*

Years later, my own full-length album would feature twelve songs, all original, and secular—and although “I Told Them I’d Die” is a rural Kentucky telling of the Prodigal Son story, my project was not as well received by the congregation as those of The Hardin Brothers. No one was outwardly unsupportive, no factions took shape, they were just noticeably jarred at the State Theatre when I sang “Annie’s Fast Asleep,” a song about Southern romance and fatherly disapproval

“But, Daddy, he’s a good man.”

Then he said, “I don’t give a damn if he’s Jesus Christ himself.”

At any rate, Mark Hardin picked up where Ron left off. The Pharisees cooled off, and pleasant new faces began to speckle the pews.

Mark made up for what he lacked in Ron’s musical prowess by entrusting a good deal of the worship ministry—song selection, bandleading, arranging—to me. We sang many of the same songs Ron had taught us, and used the same instrumentation, except now, a middle-aged truck driver named Travis would man the drums a bit more tastily than a preadolescent Luke. Travis and his family were themselves a great victory of our switch to contemporary worship music.

From the stage, guitar in hand, I watched the entire progression.

* * *

When Kelly was raised from the water, her blonde hair like one long silky ribbon, the congregation sang.

Now she belongs to Jesus,

Jesus belongs to her,

Not for the years of time alone,

But for eternity.

It had barber shop melody and chords, and there was no note I could play that would revive the E7 over *a – lone*, breathe new life into it. I had rearranged a lot of old hymns, Dad calling it the *perfect storm*: familiar lyrics and melody but new chords and beat. But “Now He/She Belongs to Jesus” was beyond repair. We feared it would become the punchline to the baptism joke, so we gave it up. Today, we pray, thanking God for new additions to our family, asking Him to help us surround them with love and support as they grow in Christ, but no one voiced that prayer from the microphone for Kelly.

She would honor her commitment to Bart as her prom date, and I had no objections. It was only fair. But again, he failed to open car doors for her. When she graduated, she took me to Project Grad—the E’town High School anti-drug, complete with Sumo wrestling, Velcro spider web, and flying-dollar booth. I wasn’t a senior yet and couldn’t get in and pin windblown bills against the glass or catch them in my shirt. But I could watch her and smile, help her count them.

The summer was Freeman Lake and moonlit swing sets.

“We can make it all the way around.”

“Isn’t it like five miles?”

“I think 10K. We’d better get moving.”

It was already dark when we set out. We walked side by side through a navy forest, crickets loud and sticks breaking. By the third mile, I was holding her hand, another first. By the fourth mile, we were walking in a closer embrace, no hurry. Soon we were treading the heights of the dam. For a couple hundred grassy yards, we moved

in unity across the ridge. Come winter, it was a steep sleigh ride down the left side, a valley, a small reservoir, and the John Helm Forest. Down the right was another steep decline, then the black shimmers of the lake. Across the lake, distant headlights passed on Ring Road. A helicopter flew overhead on its way to Fort Knox, low and loud. And higher lights blinked towards Louisville. I helped her down the path on the far side of the dam.

When we passed Thomas Lincoln's cabin and the old one-room schoolhouse, we realized that all the workers were gone and had closed the gates behind them. We ran the rest of the way back, fingers interlocking, more laughter than worry. My Toyota was on the wrong side of every locked gate. I had ridden my bike around the lake earlier that week and remembered the heavy wooden planks they were using to repair an old walking bridge. We lugged them over to the skinniest spot in the stream and started building. Headlights, wisps of fog, and pine planks over a few feet of pitch blackness, I drove my Toyota across a make-shift bridge I built with an eighteen-year-old girl in less than half an hour. We hauled the wood back to the bridge to leave no trace, cause no trouble. We were sweating and breathing hard from the excitement and the weight of the beams. She grabbed me and pulled me close. She hugged me hard, kissed me only somewhat softer. I learned my preference for a woman's lower lip.

"I've been wanting to do that."

And I had been wanting her to.

But that was June. And hard to replicate; that one night, that one embrace, perhaps enough for me.

When she started packing up for the University of Louisville, which was an hour north, I didn't help her move. There would no doubt be dramatic goodbyes, a long drive home without her. I told her it was more of a family affair.

My own senior year began. I came home late from places I shouldn't have been with friends I shouldn't have invested so much in (friends I hadn't seen all summer, and had been better for it). I found my mother's handwriting, "Kelly called." But I went to bed without calling her back. The next night, Mom knocked on the bathroom door.

"It's Kelly."

She'd met some baseball players, and since she didn't have a car, they were helping out. I told her I was glad she was making friends. Told her I was getting to know my friends again too.

Once, I did Calculus homework in her dorm room before sleepily weaving back home on I-65 in the rain.

Another time, I decided to surprise her. I called from the lobby. She came downstairs. We sat on a bench outside her dorm, not saying much, what we did say a vain pursuit of summer. I kissed her in the parking lot, but the summer wasn't there either. I drove back in the late afternoon.

And then the phone, hot against my ear.

"That's hard" was not what Kelly needed to hear. But I couldn't say it. It was, after all, a confession of sorts, to be followed by total immersion, followed by a life of commitment, sealed by something bigger than me, sealed by something more powerful than the confession, more powerful than any confessor. I could not make such a vow. Could not confess, could not be baptized, could not commit my life, even to this daisy in

a briarpatch. She soon met a Carolinian who could, a drawling southerner who planned their entire honeymoon himself, just so she'd be surprised.

* * *

Our sanctuary has five important walls: two that angle in behind the stage and divide the stage-level choir wings and the second-floor baptismal dressing rooms from the main auditorium; two that stretch down the sides of the room, housing the stained-glass windows and blocking noises of a world outside and below; and one high wall in the back that stops six feet short of the ceiling. Behind that high wall, seated on a metal folding chair, my father has manned the audio equipment for nearly three decades. As a child, I cannot recall attending a single worship service and sitting in the parallel pews down below. I sat with him in the balcony, on the edge of a metal folding chair, watching from above. I sat beside my father, who rarely touches the volume faders on the soundboard. He gets them set, then leaves them, leaning back, resting his left foot on his right knee, crossing his arms, listening. Years ago, "set" meant soft enough to save the hymnal holding, hand-directing worship minister the embarrassment of being heard. Today, "set" means the band loud enough to inspire, but perhaps not so loud as to warrant a dozen complaint cards (augmented prayer cards) from disgruntled members of the Kum Join Us Sunday School class. Dad sings during the songs. He takes notes during the sermons. He leans his head gently against his hand whenever Carroll Knight mispronounces *Deuteronomy*, which should never rhyme with *hominy*. On more obvious verbal blunders, like *Sow-crates* and *Oscar Wil-dee*, a slight head to hand gesture simply won't do, so he turns to Geoff Fitz and they both search for the right facial expression. As children, Eric and Mike Fitz, like me, were perched in the balcony beside their father,

watching him man the lights and video-camera. Geoff would only run the audio if Dad were giving the communion meditation, or down front, on the stage, singing bass with The Hardin Brothers

I saw my first computer in the church balcony. It was a grimy Commodore with a brown keyboard, and it didn't have any programs on it. I think it belonged to Mackie Pepper, our church's in-house electronics expert. It seemed to me that Mackie was single-handedly responsible for our church's annual *Living Christmas Tree*—an evergreen stronghold, furnished with a singing choir and blinking lights extravaganza. Now Mackie is merely responsible for the weekly distraction of plastic candy-wrapper crackling. Halfway through the service, we pass the communion tray. Our worship service bulletin specifies that “immersed believers” are invited to take a pill-sized, squarish cracker and a plastic cup of grape juice in remembrance of Christ's sacrifice. They do. Then they sit quietly, head bowed, sustained by gentle music on stage. It takes longer for the trays to make it up the stairs to the balcony, so balcony communion usually takes place while the rest of the congregation is placing their tithes and offerings in wooden offering trays, padded with maroon velvet to muffle coin clinking (although few are in the financial straits of that poor widow Jesus praised for depositing two coins in the temple offering). Balcony communion prayers are often interrupted by the opening remarks of our preacher's sermon, and Mackie's plastic-wrapped palate cleanser follows hard after. We select one piece of plastic-wrapped hard candy from Mackie's hand, then pass the remaining stash to the left. Our communal unraveling adds a certain allure to the sermon, not unlike a phonograph needle sizzling across vinyl.

Before we were immersed believers, Eric, Mike, and I tried to sit quietly—two tan, slightly overweight, brown-headed boys and their skinny, fair-haired friend sitting between them and holding the ticktacktoe board and intermittently being shushed by our mothers as we impatiently awaited the Mackie’s-candy aspect of this ritual.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And we’d not yet been baptized for the forgiveness of our sins and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

* * *

We moved from Paddy Court to Oakwood Drive before I started second grade. I don’t really remember any sad goodbyes to Paddy Court, just a sort of curious elation at the vast opportunities of a new neighborhood, a three-road subdivision where I already had some social footing, Mike and Eric’s house resting high on Bon Aire Drive. Eric claimed their house perched on Elizabethtown’s chief elevation point. After climbing to the top of the massive pines behind their back porch, scanning the horizon in panorama, thinking I could see Freeman Lake and the mall in the northeast distance, I believed it. You could straddle a bike in the Fitz’s garage, and, without pedaling, roll down their driveway, across Bon Aire, straight down Oakwood Drive and into my front yard, without pedaling.

Looking back, it seems that I can divide my childhood fairly cleanly into two categories: the child of Paddy Court running around in navy blue shorts with a white stripe and Converse tennis shoes, and the youngster of Oakwood Drive, taking care to lace up his cleats before heading across the neighborhood to play wiffleball. But I’m always surprised by the lack in either neighborhood of any Edenic quality. There is no

Paradise I'm conscious of. Only the fallenness of doorbell pranks and empty pizza boxes, being scared that the cussing military man really would tell my mother that I'd rung his doorbell and scrambled, arguments over whether or not I caught the football before I fell into the street, Rusty Helliard's sweaty headlock, a hyperactive refugee from Indian Hills named Luther squatting in Mr. Patterson's bushes, and dares to see who could strip naked and make it all the way to French Street and back.

I'm pretty sure Mom and Dad met the Fitz's in 1977, when what were three Melloans at that point—Johnny, Joni, and Amanda Gwyn—moved to E'town so Dad could manage a local country radio station. Geoff and Julie, recently married, welcomed the young family to First Christian. The two couples started helping out with the youth group and befriended the Hardin boys, then long-haired teenagers from Bowling Green whose father moved here to coach T. K. Stone Junior High football. Mom and Dad and the Fitz's endured countless shenanigans: weekly toilet-paperings, plastic snowmen in the front yard with "Christmas in July" painted on the bellies, even the more presidential pranks, like the cross we came home to find blazing on our roof one night mid-December.

"Wow, look—the Suzukis have a giant cross on their roof for Christmas." Mom's tone was curious, her taste offended, but her spirit a little hopeful at the possibility that our Japanese neighbors loved the baby Jesus.

"It's like the KKK," I whispered.

"No, they—

Then Amanda spoke up, "That's *our* house."

It was a Living Christmas Tree remnant, stolen from the church dungeon. Dark and musty beneath the front lobby, the dungeon was the weapons-cache of many a droll operative.

On another fateful night, ten degrees outside and the roads a mess of ice and snow, my uncle James parked his four-wheel drive Subaru in our driveway and decided to wait until morning to finish his journey from Louisville to his home in Paducah. An apostate Mouser-Christian, he was now Baptist and claiming his second and more significant water immersion had been for membership at Paducah's First Baptist Church—which couldn't have made my father feel very good, his own original baptism taking place under almost identical circumstances as Uncle James's. Mom and Dad were chatting auctions and real estate with him in our kitchen when the doorbell rang—midnight. Dad opened it and saw twenty rows of three-foot crosses, glowing in our lawn on the crest of a new fallen snow, and two laughing bandits running up the street and hopping into a purple Cougar (one of them was almost certainly my future brother-in-law, a friend of the Hardins who has yet to admit complicity in this foul deed). After everyone else went to sleep, Dad sat up in the living room, in the dark, a portrait of savvy and impatience. Hearing the purr of a Mercury Cougar, he rose and spread the blinds deftly with two fingers as the car pulled in without its headlights on. He crept to the front door and looked out the peephole. He observed the laughing bandits for a moment. They were breathing smoke and zipping up their jackets, and laughing. He grabbed the doorknob and turned it with great zeal, making a loud pop and startling the bandits. But the deadbolt was locked. When at last he pried the door open, the Cougar was gone—its

only remnant, a trail of exhaust hovering over twisted tiretracks in the snow. Dad went to bed defeated.

I think about my childhood in the world, my life outside the church walls, and I want it broad and romantic. I want a barn with a hayloft, a daily retreat where I'd run my lips across a harmonica in between books. Barefoot, with a baby robin in the pocket of my Liberty overalls, I'd sneak conversations with wise former slaves. But there's none of that. There was the church, the neighborhood, an occasional lake, the Helliards living behind us, and other things. I can't complain.

The one great beauty was our ballpark. We hauled shovels and hoes across Indian Hills and down to the field in a wheelbarrow. And we worked hard in the summer heat as cars passed on North Mulberry. We were seventh-graders scraping out base paths and beating down the overgrown weed on the chain link fence, piling up a pitcher's mound and packing it down so that the rain wouldn't wash it away. There were several of us when we started the project, but it seems like the group dwindled gradually until it was just Rusty Helliard and me meeting daily at what became known as the Sandlot. It was red clay really, but "The Sandlot" had just come out on video, and I lacked both poetic originality and knowledge of copyright issues those days.

The third base path wasn't as wide, straight, or smooth as the other base-to-base stretches, but Rusty and I were tired, and ready to play. The other kids didn't even notice, their artlessness perhaps the reason they bailed on the construction phase in the first place. One evening, after a couple of go-rounds with the wiffleball and a tiebreaker game with Rusty's ratty old Rawlings baseball, we went home for supper and I accidentally left my favorite baseball cap in the outfield overnight. When I returned for it

the following morning, it had been ripped apart. To this day, I don't know what happened. The other boys said a dog did it, but the rips seemed too calculated, too human.

The funny thing about that ballpark is that we didn't own the land. And we never even noticed its For Sale sign facing North Mulberry Street. We had no grasp of land ownership, and having neglected to ask permission to fashion the land into a ballpark in the first place, we were nonetheless indignant when construction started on the commercial strip that was to replace it. There were cries of "Save the Sandlot" and "It's not fair," but no one heard.

Months later, Kenny Taylor hung a Pittsburgh Paint sign in the window of his new business. Years later, I got my first real job, hauling five-gallon buckets of paint around in the warehouse, wheeling the dolly repeatedly from second base to the pitcher's mound.

III.

I came home from college after midnight mostly. I wouldn't tell anyone I was coming. I'd let them wonder if I'd show up and lead the band on Sunday morning. And some nights, while everyone else slept, I'd pull my car into the driveway and look out across the backyard, over the chain-link fence, up at the single lit window on the ground floor of Roland Junior's big, empty house. He stood there, and through the thick, obscured glass of the bathroom window, I discerned a longhaired profile staring into the mirror. Rusty had been Junior's stepson.

Junior high boys, Rusty and I rolled down the hill behind his basketball goal, an angry, sweaty lump, him landing on top, pinning me and smiling down through bad teeth. He had blazing red hair, and from that moment on, I exercised caution when pointing out that he had double-dribbled. When I told Mom about it, I made it more exciting, made it my first real fight, intense and dramatic. She suggested I invite him to church. One

Sunday, I walked up to their front porch and started knocking on the screen door, but Rusty jumped up from the couch and shushed me. He was wearing black jeans, a white tee shirt, and a gray patterned vest. He had combed his hair and was holding a little blue Gideon Bible. The car ride was a little awkward, Mom asking how his mother and Roland were doing, me trying to understand Rusty's combed hair, good behavior, and little Gideon Bible.

But within the hour, all the awkwardness was gone, and we were laughing in junior church with the Fitz boys. Gregg paid attention to Rusty, tried to make him feel like part of the team. Rusty was impressed that Gregg had played basketball in college. Gregg said Rusty could do the same if he wanted to, that Rusty could do even bigger things than that with a coach like Jesus. It seemed to make sense. Rusty bowed with the rest of us during prayers, and after junior church, the Fitz brothers did a good job keeping him distracted on a scrap of ticktacktoe paper during Reverend Knight's sermon.

Our family went to church every week. I don't know why that was the only time we took Rusty with us.

His mom didn't like kids in the house when she wasn't around. I remember hiding in the basement behind the bar when she came home. I sat still, trying not to rattle the crystal glasses on their dusty shelves, making sure not to stir that amber mystery in the glass decanter. I sat still and stared at it, a Kentucky Tavern collector's piece, foggy glass and dust, cursive lettering, gold seal. Then I noticed the house had been quiet for a long time. I crawled out from behind the bar and scuttled across gritty brown carpet, pushed through the forbidden door, rose to my feet in Junior's room. It was full of electric guitars and stacks of vinyl records—*Never mind the Bollocks...Here's the Sex*

Pistols, Eat a Peach, Houses of the Holy, Hotel California. I was examining his Gibson Flying V when I heard steps on the stairs, heavy and slow. I put Junior's guitar back on its stand and closed myself behind the accordion doors of a little closet. The concrete floor was cold and my bladder full. Dull afternoon light came down through the window well and through the painted-shut blinds of the closet doors, landing in lines on his stack of Playboy magazines. The forbidden door opened quietly. Then it shut. A shadow crossed the room. I was immediately terrified at the possibility that it wasn't Rusty's mom, but Junior himself in the room with me. The shadow now loomed before me. Both closet doors slid open violently and Rusty kicked me in the shin, "Get up, she's gone."

"Look," I pointed at the stack of magazines.

"I know. Come on."

In reality, Junior is a skinny man with long brown hair and a mustache. He's more like Willie Nelson than John Bonham. Headband tight, shirt off, shorts short, he runs several miles every night while the rest of Elizabethtown sleeps. I know because, by high school, I'd be slipping out into the noiseless midnight air, searching for inspiration while my parents and sister slept. Blocks from the house, ambling across Indian Hills or Presidential Estates, isolated from the rest of humanity, smoking a cigarette, searching world for song lyrics, and singing them a cappella—

For such a great big world, just a few've got the Fire in their eyes.

Next one I see, I'm asking him why, mister, why

did you get the Fire?

Cause you look alive.

Then another voice, a harmony perhaps, "Hey, Mark—" and Junior's hair would go

sailing by. I remembered the first time this happened, Freeman Lake dam, my arms around Kelly Noel, and the slim figure of a hippie jogger emerging from the darkness—“Whoa!” He sidestepped us, resuming his mad dash into the darkness, a burst of speed lifting the mane from his back momentarily. Junior was always fading into darkness.

“I can’t sleep. Junior keeps bouncing that tennis ball against the wall.”

My father likes open windows, bluegrass humidity slipping through the blinds—I think it reminds him of Hart County, the farm, cedars and angus, the great cave opening, limestone and red clay. But Junior’s nightly pre-jog ritual consists of throwing a tennis ball against the bricks repeatedly and applauding the hooves of his dog as they pound mightily against the ground. Upsetting bursts of chain link fence tally the dog’s misses. Even with the windows shut, Dad lays awake, sleepily cheering Junior’s dog not to miss—the regular slap of rubber ball on brick, after all, better than random bursts of metallic clatter.

Only years later, after Rusty and the mother left Junior alone with the dog, the deck, the chain-link fence, his guitars and the Playboy collection, did I learn that Junior preferred to be called Roland. Checking to see if they’d shelve independent folk CDs, I dialed Avatar, his record store in Radcliff, “Is Junior around, please?”

“Well... this is *Roland*.”

From then on, when I sat in the driveway looking over our yards and his chain-link fence, watching his blur examine itself, thinking whatever it thought, I respected him enough to think to myself, *Roland*.

I couldn’t make the funeral because I had a night class in Bowling Green and had opted, perhaps, to let the dead bury the dead. Instead, I opened up my journal to the page

where I'd listed hundreds of names months prior. I had listed these names—family, friends, pastors, professors—just so that I could go through twenty or so every day during my prayer time, just seeing their faces, trying to envision them happy, and safe. But this list was now the program for a private funeral service. Finding “Rusty/Roland,” I drew a black line through Rusty's name and looked at it for a long time. I didn't know if it would be right to pray for him, but I did, and I asked forgiveness in case I had done something wrong, something useless. Then I prayed for Roland too, and the mother.

Rusty died instantly down a dark, winding road between Elizabethtown, which was dry, and Lebanon Junction, which was wet. His drunk cousin would be convicted of criminal negligence. For all I know, Junior was jogging when it happened, his dog all tuckered out with a ratty tennis ball between his jaws.

They didn't find the car until the next morning.

* * *

Sometimes I'd stay occupied by sitting next to Mackie and drawing faces on the Commodore's DOS boot-up screen using green Xs and Os. That machine's only discernible function was to pave the way for more successful technological advances—a functioning PC projecting song lyrics, announcements, and movie clips on the big screen center-stage. Eventually, I'd tire of the old Commodore and scoot a little farther away from Dad to man the lights if Geoff slept in.

Over the pews hang bronze, circular light fixtures that somewhat resemble the brass communion trays on the table down front. Three such fixtures, back to front, hang from chains over each pew-column. From the balcony, you can see a variety of dust and cobweb on these fixtures unnoticed by the people below. You can also, by adjusting the

various knobs and faders that control the house and stage lights, draw people's attention to different places in the room. You can make the house lights bright enough for people to sing from the silver-fabric hymnals, or you can dim the house lights and let the lyrics on the big projection screen really gleam. And if the stage lights are too bright, people focus on what the musicians doing and not the song lyrics. At the lights, you quite influence the worship atmosphere.

One Sunday, the service was almost wrapped up, and I noticed that Eric wasn't sitting beside me anymore. He was down front, saying the Good Confession in the public glow of one of the spotlights. Then he followed Geoff out the door by the organ. A little later, his dad was leading him down into the baptistery—a watery offset above and behind center-stage that had gone fairly unnoticed by me for years. The following Sunday, only Mike and I sat quietly in the balcony. Eric partook, and bowed his head.

* * *

The highest two points on the Western Kentucky University campus are the greening bronze steeple of Cherry Hall and the gravel dance floor atop Pearce Ford Tower. PFT is crowned by a slowly flashing red light, much like the white beacon of a lighthouse, but by its color a warning to single engine airplanes. And while students are encouraged to discuss philosophy and religion on Cherry's third floor, they are heartily discouraged, under threat of expulsion, to run up that last set of PFT stairs, pick the lock with a credit card, climb the ladder and view the low grid of city lights in panorama. The fear is that a student will fall, step a little too close to the edge, then descend twenty-seven stories, jacket billowing, without wings. I've danced on the roof of PFT, held my future wife's hand, laughing at an enthusiastic frat boy as he emulated Frank Sinatra and

worked an imaginary mic and cord, himself a jazz pianist, himself a flyer of single-engine airplanes. But I can't write that part yet—just that he sang while Nicole and I spun, midnight wind and laughter.

Come daylight, the highest a student can go is the third floor of Cherry—where we sit in our desks and imagine St. Augustine imagining Plato, where we sit in those same desks and imagine John's colored horses and many-headed beasts. And I, a double major in religious studies and English, would tie these imaginings, these visions, back to the first floor of Cherry—Milton and his fallen angels, bold and stubborn in the lowest pit of hell, or Dante and his virtuous pagans, not burning in hell, but lounging in its vestibule.

I was inducted into Theta Alpha Kappa for “outstanding academic achievement” in Religion and Philosophy. The annual ceremony was set at the Beijing Restaurant, a Mongolian grill where an unspeaking chef pours water on a searing metal disk intermittently, tossing crab, carrot, and Lo Mein noodles about with giant wooden sticks, drumming the metal disk and fencing the billows of steam with showmanship and ritual. I was curling Lo Mein around my fork like spaghetti when the Buddhism specialist, Dr. Sauls, asked me what happened to Al. I let someone else speak up and say Al had moved to Chicago to work with an inter-faith society, but that it hadn't gone well. He'd left. He was, they thought, roaming the Sierra Nevadas.

Immediately, I remembered Alan taking photographs of me sprawled out on a Shenandoah mountaintop. We purchased a heap of backpacking gear and headed off to Virginia to try our hand at roaming the hills. We didn't talk much during those many hours on the trail, just bore up under the weight of our gear and took turns leading. It was

religious, opening in prayer and seasoned with adoration for the Maker of earth and sky. We spent three nights in individual tents, both reading Gideon Bibles by pen-sized fluorescent lights, him writing prose—personal and pious—and me penning country songs subtly laced with Gospel. We spent another night atop Furnace Mountain in the same tent to preserve body heat, snowflakes scurrying across the taut polyurethane—we sat up, reading passages from his favorite Gospel, John: *I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, “You must be born again.” The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.* And we spent our final night in an Appalachian Trail shelter with Tom Horn (which the grisly hiker admitted was an alias). Tom had emerged from the woods with a great hickory staff in hand, pounding the earth relentlessly as he trudged down the trail and into the shelter. We curled up in our sleeping bags on wooden shelves and listened to him spin his yarns, entertaining us all night and surprising us with his familiarity with Bowling Green. “Bowling Green? I been to Bowling Green. Lost my cherry in a Bowling Green whorehouse called Pauline’s.” And we instantly knew he was telling the truth. Pauline’s is a veritable legend in our college town. Supposedly, Henry Hardin Cherry was himself a Pauline’s regular. Cherry is now the man of greening bronze who guards Cherry Hall, clutching the lapels of his three-piece suit, declaring: “No citizen can turn his back upon the school without turning his back upon the flag” (ironically, his gaze is cast toward Pauline’s, not the university). Days later, Alan and I drove back to Kentucky, reliving our encounter with Tom Horn, imitating his famous lines, attempting

to recapture his hoarse and languid delivery, shying away from his more profane commentary. “Gawd, I remember Pauline’s. Gawd!” We censored him, pretending he said, “Gaw.”

Dr. Sauls, son of a Christian mother and Jewish father, and now a thirty-year-old who had himself wandered the hills of India and Thailand after college, was pinching a piece of General Tso’s chicken with chopsticks. “Really? Yeah, it was weird. Al came into my office and asked for an F. I told him that I’d let him withdraw, but he wanted the F. Said he wanted to shut the door.”

Six months before Beijing and Dr. Sauls’ question, I had leaned against a table in the religious studies student lounge. Alan sat on the edge of the couch, one elbow on a knee, his head perched on that hand, and his white tee shirt stark against brown-fibered upholstery of forests and mills. The window behind him was open and high, and the sky a vast, uniform blue. I listened to him speak, studying his eyes, which were also blue, and immense, perhaps too much so. The wind was turning the pages of a book he’d placed on the sill when I entered, and his voice was straining under the weight of his words.

“*We all* have an imaginary god,” he said.

* * *

At Hawk Thermoplastics in Sonora, Kentucky, a gruff Republican atheist named Allen Years and his brother-in-law, Bob, own and operate several machines that melt plastic sheets, stamp little craters into them, then chomp down around the edges of each little crater, forty or fifty at a time. The result: thousands upon thousands of little plastic weighing dishes for research labs. Another machine imposes the same process on thicker

sheets of plastic at higher temperatures. Its object: thick plastic cups used to contain the urine of factory employees, student athletes, and defendants who stand accused of drug abuse.

Summers were E'town, home, predictable, and I never looked forward to them. Alan would escape to California to work at Yosemite National Park and learn how to rock climb. I would return to my home and learn how to wake up at dawn and endure a forty-hour week. I put on jeans, boots, and an old tee shirt and headed down the Parkway towards Hawk, wondering what "light industrial work" would look like. The woman at the temp service had used that term alongside a warning that they have to keep the warehouse pretty hot or the plastic can't melt.

Jayson, the Hawk maintenance man, was a stocky motorcyclist who was proud of the number of bones he had broken. I was politely impressed. Since he hadn't yet roused the machines, I could hear his sneakers shuffling across the concrete floor as he spoke about soul piano and singing tenor in a gospel band.

"Your job's to make boxes and keep an eye on this machine." The "machine" was a mess of metal and wire about the size of a dumptruck. He patted its iron side. "Them cups start getting stacked up real high, you pick em, weigh em, bag em, box em, and smack this here label on em like so." He widened his eyes and smiled for effect, "Then make ye some more boxes."

Jayson pulled a couple of levers and pushed a big green button. The machine opened its eyes with an ungodly moan then began biting down repeatedly on the hot plastic.

Then, proudly displaying his left hand so I could get a good look at his mangled index finger, he shouted over the hum and racket: “One more thing! Every male that’s worked at Hawk has lost a finger or a portion of a finger to her! So watch it!” I thought about Josh Ferrell, a dead-head everyone called *Cheeck* in high school. Before Spanish class, the one subject in which Cheech excelled, he turned to me and explained the meaning of the three-fingered hand on the back of his black tee-shirt: “Yeah, man. It’s Jerry Garcia’s hand.” Then his right hand made a dramatic vertical stroke, not unlike the first part of a Catholic priest’s blessing. “Dude! He *chopped* off his finger to protest the war. Ah, but he could still jam.”

I looked at my hands momentarily, then started making boxes.

By mid-summer my fear of the machine had dwindled considerably, a confidence Dad called “unwise.” But I had observed that the “ungodly moan” was actually a musical pitch, a droning D that I could harmonize with. Before long, I was humming a variety of tribal melodies to the machine’s monotonous accompaniment, the effect not entirely unlike that of a bagpipe.

* * *

Early on Alan had confided that he preferred people to address him by his full name, *Al* being somehow wrong, not capturing his essence as accurately as Alan—then and now, I agree. Alan had curly blonde hair, shining locks, not unlike a crown, and he was not atop PFT with us that night. He would not have been in that kind of memory, charming and lighthearted. He would’ve been walking the streets below, sneakers just pigeon-toed, hands in jean pockets, staring starward in prayer, or meditation, or brooding. Today, were I to pass him, myself on a midnight walk, or were I to slow my car, rolling

down the window, asking if he'd like a ride and knowing that he didn't, his eyes would turn and look to mine, or just past them. He would smile and speak with sensitive quietude, making efforts to listen to my words, but somehow looking past them, replying softly, smiling, courteously enduring a profound uncontact.

I don't remember meeting him, just that we were brothers from the start, confessing that we'd never before had a truly Christian friend, a friendship for which Christ Himself was the center of gravity. We walked the heights and depths of Bowling Green after midnight, webbed in theological complexity. We agreed that God wants us to ask questions, questions the mark of true faith, and ease the mark of convenient faith—not to mention the twin brother of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *cheap grace*. But like the German theologian, executed for a failed conspiracy to assassinate Adolf Hitler, we were soon taking matters into our own hands.

Both of us regularly attended Campus Crusade for Christ. It was a Thursday night gathering in the giant lecture hall in the basement of the education building. CRU was a hundred trendily-clad college kids that opened with praise songs led by a clumsy rock band (I've always thought praise band musicians obligated to play tight, expressing the profound unity of our faith: *one Lord, one faith, one baptism... one beat*. But I've developed a trifle more patience over the years, trying to focus on the sincerity of unmusical songleaders.). After the songs came the highlight of CRU liturgy, a brief comic-routine. The Board meetings at the *Seventh Street First Baptist-Methodist King James Church of God and Jesus* were always a hit. Then Thomas Weeks, round glasses and the remnant of a teenage stutter, would bring the Word. Without any frontier fire and brimstone bravado, he would share that we are sinners and should stop kidding ourselves,

that we were created by a holy and just God, and that the price of our sin was nothing less than death itself—well-deserved and impending. But God didn't want us to suffer that death, what John calls "the second death." In fact, He wanted so badly for us to have life, and life with Him, that He'd come and paid a price we could not pay: Jesus is not the policeman who slaps us with a million-dollar speeding ticket; nor is He the policeman who lets us off the hook; He is the policeman who writes up the ticket, then Himself pays the fine. Alan and I would leave, not discussing the enormity of God's grace, but scrutinizing Thomas's vocabulary.

"Jesus was a cop?"

"Yeah, that was pretty off." We came up with a more accurate courtroom scene: Jesus as a Judge who pronounced a guilty verdict, de-robed, descended from the bench, personally endured the punishment he had prescribed, came back later, re-robed, and pronounced us innocent, the penalty paid. We still thought the illustration a bit vulgar, but improved. Such discussions were becoming more and more foundational to our faiths, our verbiage a thing convoluted and private. We had not yet learned humility, nor that every hour of speaking warranted sixty such of prayer and study. I fancied us blooming *theo-logians*, experts of *God word*. And I depended on him; confessed my sins, my doubts. I asked him if he thought it was wrong for me to pray for a dead friend. He didn't know, but he suspected it a matter of sincerity, and love.

From time to time, we would drop by each other's apartments unannounced to share something we had read, or to pray. It wasn't a strange thing, and that was the beauty of it.

"You know, we're the church. *Wherever two or more are gathered, right?*"

* * *

I was enamored with Nicole from the start. Two years before Hawk, her dark curls rested on the shoulders of her long black sleeves, her matching black skirt reaching down below her knees towards heeled, black boots. The stage was decorated with wreaths and poinsettias for Christmas and she sang “Welcome to Our World” with poise and a striking Broadway diction, and although her eyes said something profound and constant, she wasn’t a talker. In fact, I only remember her opening her mouth to sing. Her mother, however, had not been deprived the blessed gift of gab, and a variety of middle-aged churchwomen began to plan my wedding.

Since her farm was only four or five miles from Hawk, I drove over there every day after work. An Elizabethtown summer consisted of weighing, bagging, and boxing several thousand plastic cups, talking politics over lunch with Allen Years, heading over to Nicole’s, then sleepily driving back to Elizabethtown to crawl back into bed before starting the whole cycle again.

I had been talking to Jayson about Nicole for about a month, telling him how special she was, how she’d never made a B in her life. He was especially interested in the fact that her father was a doctor and that their white colonial house sat high on a hill surrounded by horses, white fences, and a swimming pool. He asked me if I loved her. For Jayson, it was a simple syllogism: he sort of jabbed out his arm, revealing a *Jessica* tattoo pulsing on the soft side of his forearm, and extended a mangled index finger with great effect, “If you so much as suspect you love this gal,” then adding his middle finger to the equation, “And you are attracted to her—physically, I mean.” He put his hand on his hip, “Then there you go, you gotta tell her, hoss.”

The simplicity of Jayson's syllogism, the smallness of it, was somehow encouraging.

So I stacked boxes in the Hawk heat and ground up excess plastic all day, practicing *I love you* while performing my various light industrial tasks, but the shredder wasn't very romantic. He had a big metal mouth with flimsy rubber teeth and whirling blades in its throat. Since he roared ravenously whenever we fed him, I had started wearing earplugs. And although these earplugs made the bagpipe mix more euphonious, they made my *I love you's* watery and strange. So I took them off and issued a practice *I love you* above the mechanical moan. Jayson looked up at me in confusion, "Huh?"

* * *

I remember Alan telling people who asked that he was majoring in *theology*. I knew it wasn't true and reminded him that he was majoring in *religious studies*. It was the difference between studying the Gospel of Matthew as a religious document and studying the Gospel of Matthew as the Gospel; the difference between reading about other religions on a chart in Sunday School and chatting with an affable Hindu in the downtime between *Life of Jesus* and *Buddhist Religious Traditions*. When he tired of hearing me remind him that the third floor of Cherry was not seminary, and that it might be dangerous to think of it as such, he started saying, "Well, I need some theology." He didn't want to know the route of Paul's third missionary journey. He didn't want to know the Jesus Seminar's verdict on the Synoptic Problem. He wanted to know where he should put the Muslims he was interviewing for his *Religion in Contemporary America* course—to heaven, or to hell, with the faithful of other faiths? There was one man, in

particular, he could not shake—a Nashville imam with short gray hair, olive skin, and immense hazel eyes. Where would he put this man?

And I would always give him orthodoxy, as best I knew it. Of course, for me, orthodoxy was a brand new thing. Before college, I'd been a Sunday School kid with a conveniently simple Jesus and a closed Bible. Baptism was perhaps a dip in the pool. Now I was a biblical scholar and college evangelist with rain-wrinkled pages in the book of Acts. I'm not sure which is worse; both versions of me claimed to know all, and knew little.

This pride was a result of things Dr. Troughman taught us, but it was not his fault. Troughman had an office much like Carroll Knight's, and he too wore square glasses, but with a smile and eyes that made all the difference. He served God not from a pulpit, but from half a wooden lectern resting on a small table in front of the chalkboard. He had a humble admiration for scripture, unparalleled in the department, but he knew Western was a state school, and he liked it better that way. He knew his material—historical contexts, textual dilemmas, critical interpretations—better than any professor I've ever known. He also knew my second major was English. Once, I explained my late critical essay on Calvin Roetzel's *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context* in an email about Baker Street Bar. I wrote about Curtis, a budding blues prodigy and my good friend. I wrote about how, since Curtis had only asked me to make a guest appearance on bass for one song, I didn't need to bring my own bass rig—I could just use Witty's. Then I described Witty, Curt's usual, in detail: 5'2", ninety pounds, tight stone-washed jeans, fine brown hair mysteriously tucked into those jeans in the back and the rest of it dangling across his bass strings in the front. For reasons entirely unfathomable (trust me,

my bass-playing is more a smiling Paul McCartney than a Red Hot Chili Pepper; more a Beatle than a Flea), the red light on Witty's amp had expired, signaling the end to its long, prosperous career. Discovering the malfunction, Witty issued incoherent threats—"Scratch it, partner! What about it!" What seemed a full minute of Witty's beady eyes, silently vibrating just inches from my face, would follow. I was wearing oxford button-up—he reached over and undid the top button with less zing and a bit more ruffle than was certainly intended. I guess I could've returned the favor and plucked myself a flake of the screen-printed tiger on his tee shirt, but I didn't. I turned the other lapel and told Curtis I'd be contented to walk home. When I finally got back, the alarm clock in my PFT dormroom glowed 3:36 in the morning. I was born at 3:36 in the afternoon. So the whole thing must have had some profound meaning in it.

Troughman replied to my email: "Mark, Wow, that sounds like quite an adventure. You're a good writer. Dr. Daniel Troughman." I got an A on the Roetzel critique.

Alan, too, was a double major in religious studies and English, but I'm sure he never wrote Troughman any emails about a twitching-Witty. He instead wrote an exegesis on Revelation 14 that Troughman encouraged him to submit to the Theta Alpha Kappa journal. In that passage, one angel tells another angel, who is sitting on a cloud, to take his sharp sickle and reap—"The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath. They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia." In preparation, Alan brooded on this wrathful passage for months. But I only remember one feature of the final essay: Alan's

interest—or John’s interest, rather—in the sharpness of the sickle, “sharp” being used in connection to the reaper’s blade four times in just five verses. Troughman was keen on *close reading*.

I’d try to use that to my advantage on the first floor of Cherry and approach Sydney and Spenser exegetically—Dr. Glass loved it. But when I tried to apply the same tactics to Wordsworth and Keats, I drove my classmates and professor crazy, challenging their favorite readings of their favorite poems. Of course, I’ve had some favorite readings too.

On one occasion, I approached Troughman while he was erasing the chalkboard between Life of Paul and Revelation Seminar. I suggested an alternate reading of Romans 9, the *Jacob have I loved* verse. I didn’t like God loving Jacob and hating his red-headed brother, Esau. I also didn’t like any interpretation in which Paul seemed to be echoing my father, *because I said so*. Or, in this case, *because God said so*. I produced an explanation I’ve since forgotten, and when I wrapped it up, he just nodded his head, but said nothing.

“Maybe we’re both right,” I suggested.

“No,” he grinned. “I’m not that much of an English major.”

Another time, I was in his office chatting seminaries. Behind him was a giant window through which I could see PFT towering in the distance. I was a little distracted by it, looming behind him like that. I missed something he said about Fuller in Pasadena, California.

“What about Southern?” I asked.

“Mark, they will *tell* you the truth.” It was not a compliment.

He cultivated thinking, preparing our minds, not just to answer, but to grapple with and to trust through the hard questions: predestination—God only saves those He chooses to save?, inclusivity—what about the virtuous natives, the pagans who have never heard the name of Christ? But again, he was not arbitrary, nor his beliefs fluid. At a CRU-sponsored event in DUC auditorium, Troughman told two hundred students that, as a teenager, he had rebuked his buddy for declaring that God was irrelevant. Later, considering his hypocrisy, he asked *himself* if God mattered, and he discovered that his god didn't. His god was vague and confined to a Methodist church building. Back in his bedroom, Troughman would read the Gospel of Mark, start to finish. He would “never be the same.” Having had the courage to ask the question, and having endured the utter fear of that question, he had found in it salvation. And for the rest of his life, he would exhaust doubt, engage scripture, engage it critically, trusting it to hold up under his scrutiny. And it did. Running his finger across the small print, closing his eyes to envision riders on brilliant horses, opening them to scrawl notes about the structure of Revelation, the role of phrases like “in the Spirit,” he would entrust each question to God—he would worship honestly, or not at all. He would reach by what light he had for the divine character, and he would reveal that character to a dark world, not by jerking us to attention, but by patiently removing the lampshade. This lampshade was centuries of assumption, poor reading, no reading, and he would remove it in our presence. Believers and unbelievers alike were fascinated by the light. It is confusing and inconvenient, penetrating. And he knew this. He had personally endured it, and so believed in it strongly.

Junior year, Alan and I prayed on our knees side by side, ourselves trying to worship honestly, ourselves trying to walk in the light. He had moved into Raybould's dorm a week after me. It was an eight tenant—four rooms upstairs, four down—white-siding shack fifty yards from Cherry Hall. Sam Raybould added it to his backyard in the forties, around the time he ran Topper Café across the street from Cherry Hall. Now he was in the closing stages of Alzheimer's and his daughter was taking care of things, occasionally catching me on the sidewalk, telling me about the clothesline that used to hang across the yard, her a girl, cool linen sheets billowing against her face, and Daddy Sam laughing. "He won't be around much longer, I'm afraid."

Alan was drawn to the one room, wooden simplicity of Raybould's. Although I had chosen the room on the southern corner in the shade of overgrown cedars (the room having no AC, I hoped it would be cooler there), Alan had opted for the northern corner, in the bright morning sun. He had mistakenly thought a Catholic priest lived in the adjoining room, but he had misunderstood Mary Ellen when she told him about Father Dale and the Catholic Newman Center just next door. He was disappointed, but he still moved in. He decided his room would be sparse and holy: few books, fewer clothes, a small laptop computer and a ceramic mug. He cut out a black cardboard crucifix and hung it over his bed's headboard. He began transcribing the Psalms on his laptop every night before he brushed his teeth, splashed water on his face, and dabbed it dry on a white towel. He went to bed late and woke up early. He drank purified water from a ceramic mug at regular intervals day and night.

When his parents came to visit, they couldn't understand it. They had raised this sensitive boy in the foothills of Appalachia, held him when he cried and never had to

spank him. They had never understood him. Years earlier, his father was about to hang a saddle on a wooden fence when he glimpsed his only son, standing in the middle of the pasture, staring at seven horses running his way full gallop. His dad dropped the saddle and ran as fast as he could—helplessly. And he was still a great distance away when the horses passed. His feet faltered beneath the weight of his emotion. He dropped to his knees and beheld his son, still standing, and only now slowly turning his head, blonde curls in the wind. But his mother was not in the field that day. Neither did she see the storm of hooves pounding around her son in that small apartment, only that the warm jacket she'd bought him was hanging in the closet with the tag still on it, the cans of food she'd brought last month uneaten.

We prayed with our elbows on his bed. We prayed to God, who is beautiful, who is powerful. Once, us coming up from our knees, Alan mentioned that we prayed differently: I seemed to approach a holy throne, bowing, surrendering before God's radiance, almost as if I could close my eyes and see the Creator. But Alan would pray differently, saying, "God, surely You are more beautiful than we could ever imagine." I don't think I was imagining Yahweh on His gleaming throne and Jesus of Nazareth at His right hand, but perhaps something like it—not because I actually thought this the lone and infallible visible rendering of God, but because it was biblical, symbolic, functioning like a poem or a good icon. I've tried to envision God as something "more beautiful than I could ever imagine," but when I did, it became brilliant reds and golds, a dazzling inkblot pulsing with authority and light, but something I had made. The throne, the cherubim, the Lamb at the right hand—it is scriptural, revealed, something I would have

never fashioned. Too gaudy perhaps. But I did not make it, and that is its beauty. *It is the very truth of God and not the invention of any man.*

Today, if I imagine, I imagine a raging black sea, beating the ship, and several dark-haired men shouting in Aramaic. Then one man—not unlike the others in dress or form—calmly standing in their midst, “Peace, be still.”

But, at the time, when Alan found meaning in us hitting our knees, closing our eyes, and seeing different gods—it was startling. I began to suspect our inadequacies, feared some creeping heresy, because when I first grew passionate about converting Curtis, I didn’t trust the two of us to discuss the things of God in the presence of a third party. God would have to speak for Himself.

I first met Curtis in my English 200 professor’s radio. Dr. Russell entered the room with a Big Red sand doll and a rounded boom box, scuttling his feet across the floor, setting down his effects, pushing his parted gray hair to the right, and asking, “Alrighty, alrighty, children. Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?” Taking his seat behind a small wooden desk, he set his miniature of our school mascot on his left palm and stared at it intently. Then he started slamming the doll against the desk repeatedly, “Bad Big Red! Bad! Big! Red!” I caught eyes with a Pi Kappa Alpha across the room, himself to wear the Big Red uniform and scurry across the hardwood floor of Diddle Arena, thousands cheering, but now, in this classroom, my very reflection, wide-eyed and mystified by this exhibition. He was a beautiful person. But I just cannot write him now.

Tossing the doll to the floor, and relaxing in his seat, Dr. Russell invited us to meet his friend, Curtis. When he pressed play, a scruffy teenage voice started claiming to

be the “ice cream man” repeatedly between solid blues guitar riffs. That very afternoon, I met Curtis again on the cover of *Tweed*, a local entertainment publication: his face, in various shades of gray, was printed about as large as a twelve-inch speaker, his hair similar though less angelic than Alan’s, and his eyes more Nirvana than B. B. King. Just hours later, I would meet Curtis in person, smiling under a straw hat, drinking Killian’s, laughing in the parking lot outside a frat party. I introduced myself as a songwriter, told him I’d seen him on *Tweed*, told him Dr. Russell had opened up English 200 by airing “Ice Cream Man.”

“Cool, man—yeah, he had my sister in class, loved her.”

“You go to Western?”

“No, I’m just doing the music thing—you write? You should come over, we’ll write.”

He lived on Homestead Court in a two-story brick colonial with an herb garden, a miniature log cabin, and a well-groomed, permanent croquet court in the backyard. It was an aesthetic paradise, where everything was grown with care and purpose, from the father-son masonry between the railroad ties bordering the herb garden, to the shining pots and pans carefully hung over the kitchen counter, to the homemade hardwood floor—polished pine laid strip by strip, even to the Schilling boys, who were raised on slices of apple and orange. His mother, Carolyn, was an accomplished pastels artist and memorabilia photographer for Gibson guitars, the Corvette Museum, the Kentucky Derby; his father was a retired oilman and seller of miscellaneous merchandise to regional vendors.

I passed under a surfboard signed by the Beach Boys and bolted to the kitchen ceiling; under the dining room chandelier—a perilous nest of various sticks and twigs, cut and woven between brass cambers; up one flight of stairs—two boat oars for handle rails; and into Curtis’s bedroom, which, like my own, had three or four guitars hanging from the wall. He took one down, sat on his unmade bed, and played “Ice Cream Man,” then “Angels Walkin’ Over Town.”

Missouri River, can you understand my pain?

Louisiana blues callin’ my name.

His sandaled heel beat the hardwood sporadically, his ankle bracelet jingling like a tambourine, his neck and Adam’s Apple straining forward for every note. He wrapped it up and told me Johnny Lang was thinking of recording it. Then he said it was my turn—he was holding the guitar by its neck, extending it to me like a rifle. So I played “Beale,” an ominous selection from my unfinished Civil War opera, *To Climb a Hill*. It was circusy and haunting, a riddle about a wicked, red-eared, smoke-breathing observer of Gettysburg.

The bayonet on my rifle’s three points of steel.

But I didn’t move like Curtis. I played each note with precision, my voice less an instrument those days and more a means to an end. I wasn’t an entertainer, but a songwriter, and songwriting a private affair, performing a piece something like sharing a secret. Curtis was no veteran salesman of his material, but he was giving it a try. And that’s something he taught me: I would have to sell my songs before people would buy them. The song may be true as Gospel, but we must see it, see it on the outside, be

inspired by its physical presence. We can't assume it lies within, rattling around behind the voice, like a ghost.

“Wow, those chords are great—it's the devil, right?”

“Yeah, Beale as in Beelzebub.”

He just squinted and cocked his head a little.

For years, I'd regret that having been the first song I played him, and the one so frequently requested by his family, his little brother—an adolescent drummer precociously at ease in barroom conversation, past midnight, casually tearing down his kit, debating whether or not he'd get up for school in the morning. “Beale” was sinister, and I can't help but think the devil himself likes to hear it. Whatever the case, upon my first visit to Homestead, an entire family would hear that song and brand me a fine writer. They would feed me a gourmet hamburger, smoked in a giant smoker-grill the little brother built in shop class, sandwiched between toasted sesame buns, garden spices, blue cheese crumbs, potato chips with homemade dipping sauce, and a dill pickle. Caroline would supplement this banquet with a mug of hot chamomile tea for my cold, again homegrown.

Before I left, Curtis asked me to sign his kitchen wall, which I thought a great—if strange—honor for having penned this enigmatic folk epic. But on that wall were the names of hundreds of Homestead visitors, their heights, their names, the date of each visit.

Over the next couple of months, I'd become a Homestead regular. I would learn that Curtis's family was always home, always preparing for dinner, always entertaining a fantastic miscellany of guests. They were hospitable, and hence influential, wine and ale

flowing for young and old, *Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts* and the sign of the cross before meals, his mother standing all-hours at the kitchen window, seeking God in the backyard dogwood and praying for the robin on its branch. She was beautiful, long blonde hair in curls and blue eyes, but she seemed so distant at this window. Each time I approached the side door, knocking, looking through the door window and into the kitchen, she would abandon her muse, her blank stare becoming a welcoming smile, her hand beckoning me in.

Which we are about to receive from Thy bounty,

Indeed, it must have come from the divine bounty. I always wondered how an artist who wasn't currently painting and a former oilman whose livelihood was based on a mysterious stack of wholesale catalogues—both of whom rarely left the house—acquired their bounty. But they ate, and it seemed, lived well. I loved their company.

Through Christ, Our Lord,

but I'd asked the little brother—the most observant and honest fifteen-year-old I've known—and he did not claim Christ was His Lord. I think he already knew where to draw the lines: Christ was religion, an Easter wafer, a sip of wine.

And if some demon was assigned to this family, slithering around behind the sheetrock, beneath the hardwood, amid the rafters, he was a lazy evil, not a trickster. Because I think I saw his tail flash across the eyes of their cat, purring ominously on the father's lap, gray tail caressing the former oilman's graying beard. I think I saw it flicker in his eyes too.

Amen.

I took up praying in their driveway before I'd enter.

Come winter, Alan, Curtis, and I were lugging the Schillings' giant kerosene heater down to Lost River Cave on Tuesday nights to drink pumpkin spice cappuccino and read great lengths of the New Testament and *Mere Christianity* aloud. I decided Lewis's theological tractates, radio addresses delivered during WWII to raise British morale, were a safe addition—I knew them well—and also fitting, since the original hearers were themselves underground in bomb shelters. But again, I would own no words we spoke on these nights; I would read them, and Curtis asked no questions some passage could not answer. Curtis, a day-job tour guide with keys to the gate, had first unveiled this gaping limestone mouth in late September. A larger opening than the fifty-footer by my father's boyhood home, Lost River Cave had a deep emerald river running into it and was once a Confederate base for John Hunt Morgan, then a mill, then a Jesse James hide-out, later an eccentric nightclub with a polished-concrete dancefloor, and then for us, a dim-lit dripping sanctuary where smooth waters muffled the echo of scripture and theological essays. The foglights on my Mercury lit the gravel and ivy as we descended. Then I'd park, cut the lights, and Curtis would disappear into the darkness momentarily to pull a lever that lit the cave with ambience and invitation. Occasionally, we'd start with a johnboat ride, trolling motor purring behind us, pushing us deeper and deeper into the karsty earth. Above us—bedrock, moving headlights, the Homestead, the flashing red light of PFT, perhaps a single-engine airplane, and the moon, a world in motion. But down there, the cave's immense dome was an orange glow of stillness. I'd drop my hand in the water, let it wake, look back at Curtis, the captain, manner of the motor, and say, "This is great." But whether or not we opened with a private tour, Curtis pointing out his favorite stalactites, we always assembled our square—three nylon-

backed camping stools and the heater. And we always opened with prayer, each word pouring from our mouths in wisps of gray air.

I'd pen two songs about this place, "1933"

Rock bottom, ain't had a dime in near four years,

Bartender, what do we owe you for the beers?

So let's get this straight—I can't drive home unless

I make a flawless ascent of them steps?

But, man, there as steep as the Tuesday the stock market crashed.

and "Morgan Hunt's Mill," a co-write with Curtis

Open book, open doors, always room here for some more,

"Amazing Grace," what a sweet sweet sound,

So you wanna meet the Ghost? Stick around.

I wanted Curtis to meet Jesus, receive His Spirit, so Alan and I prayed for him every Tuesday, his eternal salvation a thing too heavy for me to carry alone. We'd roll into his driveway, sometimes pray again, then meet Carolyn at the kitchen door. She loved the idea of the reading group until she found out what we were reading—then it became a thing strange and threatening, and understandably so. We must have seemed like Mormons, blonde-headed and casually evangelistic, just not dressing as nice or riding bicycles. And the oilman, too, was suspicious, catching my eyes each time they crossed the half-empty bottle in his hand, the empty bottle on the hardwood by his boot. He cocked his head. "Be good," he murmured. Then winking at the floor, "God bless us."

On the way to the cave, we would stop at a gas station on 31W, pay for three coffees and a tank of kerosene, and fail to satisfy the Tuesday night clerk—a middle-aged woman with a WWJD bracelet—with our explanations of the ritual. She would have certainly wondered why I didn't just invite Curtis to church, follow protocol. But I would have explained that I had already done so, had taken him to the Christian Church on Roundhouse Road. During worship, four smiling vocalists sang what may or may not have been the same song, a white-haired pianist reluctantly chorded along on her piano, and all the while, vocalist number four—a stocky man of silly smile and poofy hair—pounded the buttons of a book-sized drum machine with his index fingers. Curtis, both musician and connoisseur, would never hear the Gospel in such circumstances. Alan and I would therefore have to be the church for Curtis.

* * *

Nicole came tiptoeing out to my car in with wet hair sticking to her shoulders and a towel tied around her chest, smiling at me and talking on a cordless phone. She has always been a thing of seasons—quiet, bookish Decembers and July's of warmth and a lighter heart. Standing in her driveway, Hawk Thermoplastics still ringing in my ears, I remembered Kelly and a seventeen-year-old kid whispering *That's hard*.

She motioned for me to follow her in, and she left little tracks of water around the arcing sidewalk, across the porch, into her mother's kitchen. She hung up the telephone, and we just looked at each other smiling for a little while. Then I guided her over to the couch.

“I need to tell you something.”

She must have tucked her feet up under her when we sat down, because she was looking down at me. I could hear her little brothers through the open window, splashing in the pool, one saying *Marco* repeatedly and the other answering each time *Polo!* Then more splashing and laughter. The summer breeze was in the curtains. It was as good a time as any for a confession. So, without taking a deep breath or clearing my throat, I whispered words I'd never whispered before.

And it was nothing like I'd practiced—it came out too quickly, too softly.

She squinted her left eye, leaned her head in a little, and echoed Jayson, "Huh?"

* * *

Alan was still echoing his refrain, a continuing need for "some theology." But I was drawing back from such conversations, quoting Paul more frequently, encouraging him, "You'll get your theology—it's based on the Bible." He knew all that, and more. Soon, he was asking if one book of the Bible, the Gospel of John, was sufficient.

We were in the Raybould parking lot around ten at night. A motion light about seven feet up the dorm's siding lit the area. "God is Spirit, and His followers must worship in spirit and in truth," he quoted. "Do we really need anything else?" *Sharp sickle, winepress and wrath, blood to the bridles?* And—he needed to know—could a life based on that one book be lacking in any way? I hadn't thought about it before. I answered that John had written three other books, the epistles.

"And maybe four other books," he replied, meaning Revelation.

"Yeah, if it's the same John."

"Do you think it is?"

"I think it's the same God, no matter."

Alan leaned a shoulder against his gray Cherokee and studied the back of Raybould's house. The living room glowed orange, wood-paneled and quiet behind wavy antique glass. Mary Ellen passed the window with a tray.

"She said he won't last much longer."

I told him that Frank, another tenant, called Mr. Raybould "Sammy the Bull."

"They're Catholic."

I remembered Mary Ellen saying that she wasn't very religious, but that she had a friend who was: "She calls every week, and Father Dale checks in a lot too." I remembered Alan and I, after attending a mass, debating whether Catholicism was ritual or relationship, deciding it could be either.

Then Alan started talking about the Muslim again, telling me about his kindness, his hospitality, his sincerity. I hadn't met this hazel-eyed imam, and although I was sure he possessed these many virtues, I was weary of him, weary of his bearing on Alan's faith. We must not have moved for a while, because the motion light went off, leaving us there in the dark. Irritated, I walked over and waved my arm in front of it, brought it back to life. Alan kept talking about the imam.

The many things he said about this man were punctuated with a passionate "He believes what he believes like we believe what we believe, Mark."

I shook my head. "Alan, you're not doing him any favors by pretending he's okay."

* * *

I was nine. Mom, my sister, and I were on our way to Granny and Granddaddy's farm in our navy LeSabre. I was in the back, kicking Amanda's seat to get even for her

calling front when Mom used a chestnut I'd not heard before, and wouldn't hear again: "I brought you into this world, and I can take you out of it." The two-lane highway between Hodgenville and Uno, 31-E, sways as you pass Abraham Lincoln's birthplace and the Lincoln Jamboree, but as you start pulling away from Magnolia, the forest closes in and the highway rolls. Trees flicker like eight-millimeter film, and once you're eyes adjust, you look out across Kentucky farmland, low and green, bowing upwards to meet the foundation of an occasional home, quiet and still. I too sat quietly, trees flickering, farmland low and green. The LeSabre coasted down a hill and to the left, releasing into sunlight for a moment, crossing a river. Colorless water, low and still. And green grass growing on the lid of a rusty water tower, round and wide.

Granddaddy's vice not the drinking of liquor, but the speaking of it, he likes to retell Uno's etymology. Once *Clear Pint*, a man could secure a *clear pint* of bottled wreckage in this dim-lit village; Clear Pint then turned *Clear Point* to somewhat dispel the shame; but by this time, the *Clear Point* doings were far too known. A man was left to answer *where to* more coyly: *Ah, you know*. Uno, Kentucky, shares no ties—in pronunciation or history—with the popular card game. Uno was just a place men went to pour some uncertainty into lives all too certain.

We pulled into the gravel ditch in front of my grandparents' dairy farm and Amanda unclipped her safety belts, pulled the passenger handle, and jumped out. Mom was still gathering her purse. I crossed my arms on the bench seat's cloth upholstery—Dad didn't like a car with bucket seats—and said I needed to be baptized. She stopped collecting her things. Amanda was already on the porch, touching daisies under the white gable and cast-iron Hawk. But Mom was in no hurry.

“I could go anytime. I need to be ready. And I want Dad to do it.”

“Okay then, you need to tell him when we get home.”

So, that night, after 31-E in the darkness, I did.

He was watching the Yankees. And he wasn't listening really closely until he realized what I was saying. He turned off the TV and gave me his attention, pleased. I know this, but I didn't see it. I was looking down at my tennis shoes and the brown carpet.

“Okay, bud. You'll need to tell Gregg.”

They were happy, this a thing of gravity and blessing, but they didn't want to overreact, spread the baptismal word, warm up the waters, force the issue. I would have to make the arrangements myself. So, come Sunday night at LIGHT—*Love is giving, helping, teaching*—I found myself telling Gregg Parson, our youth minister, that I wanted to be baptized, and that I really wanted my dad to do it.

* * *

The Apostle Paul seems to indicate that God chooses those He will save, Romans 9 offending our democratic sentiments: “I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau.” He made them both, but He loves one and hates the other. Why? “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” The theological term is “predestination,” today more associated with Protestant Reformer John Calvin than the Apostle Paul. Since God is omnipotent, He is in charge of all things that transpire here on earth. Yes, through Christ, He authors grace, the redemption of sinners, but in His power and authority—His divine sovereignty—He handpicks those who will accept that grace. He has already orchestrated who will stand and come before

the congregation, declaring, “I believe, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Dr. Troughman interprets Paul in this very way. And Alan said he couldn't get away from it. He too came to interpret Paul this way, but while a younger Troughman had pressed ahead, allowed his understanding of God to change, allowed himself to change, Alan loved his God dearly, loved Him the way He was, didn't want to see Him as the Creator of both heaven and hell.

I confided in my father one night in our living room. “Alan's got a real problem with hell.”

“I do too,” he said. He had on pajama pants and reading glasses. Whenever I wanted him to speak, wanted his advice, wanted the right answers, he would suddenly become a great listener. He leaned back in the armchair and crossed his right foot over his left knee. I was looking him in the eyes now.

“I do too,” I said.

* * *

She hardly even looked at the ring. And since I had been searching for the perfect one for about two months, I was initially disappointed. Then I realized that this was better: her shaking, crying, squeezing me so hard that I was an awkward lump in her arms.

When it's cold outside, I don't leave my guitar in the car. So there was nothing unexpected about me bringing it in. She had answered the door half-dressed, her upper body dressed and made up, her lower half barefoot and in her little navy shorts. When

she went back upstairs to finish getting ready, I carried my guitar into the living room and undid the latches.

She came back down the stairs and was a wholeness of beauty and comfort. I asked her to sit and listen. I had written a new one.

I want to run with you through the shadows of the branches,

I want to break on through the woods into the breeze.

I want to lay with you, in a field of blue.

So I don't know why,

I haven't bought the ring.

“You’re disappointed.”

She was.

“I’m sorry. Let me play you a happier one—grab me a pick.”

She reached over and opened up the flap inside my guitar case—if she had been really observant, she would’ve noticed that its interior was unusually clean, but she didn’t. All she noticed was a little velvet ring box, tears smearing her makeup, and me, helping her back up to her seat, sitting her down, kneeling in front of her.

* * *

Days before Alan’s “imaginary god” confession, I remember us coming back to my room after supper. I pulled the chain over the mirror for some talking light. A single bulb in clouded glass was so much warmer than the fluorescent humming fixture wired to the switch. Him settled in my leather recliner, me on my wooden typing chair, I asked about the drifting, “We were the church.” He told me he was glad I asked. It was him. He wasn’t the same.

“Mark, imagine how many people God has created,” his eyes searched my bookshelves for support. And it was there. And plenty of opposition too. But in this moment, those many books just looked down at him in silence. “And imagine how many people he must have created only to be doomed to hell.”

He didn’t believe in hell anymore. And he wasn’t satisfied by my suggestion that his interest in people of other faiths could be used for great evangelistic purpose. No, all were destined for heaven. The same grace that extended to Mother Theresa is extended to Hitler.

“Mark, I don’t see how anyone, finally approaching God at the judgment, could not acknowledge His glory, *love* Him. I believe God is going to give you everything.” Like Restorer D. S. Burnet, Alan believed all men would confess the truth of Christ at the end of time, but for Alan, upon that final Good Confession, God extends His grace to one and all confessors, the whole of history having been one long, painful non-issue, forgiven and forgotten. Not only salvation, but universal salvation had come through Jesus Christ. The blood of God on a Roman cross not only paid the penalty of sin—atoned for our alliances with and allowances of evil—it erased the evil, completely.

Alan would come to learn, after Chicago streets among the twitchy-handed and cat-eyed, a fuller appreciation for the existence of evil.

Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light.

I already knew evil. I knew it then. I had seen it. After a night with friends I shouldn’t have been with and places I shouldn’t have been, I curled up on the concrete floor of a jail cell and rested my head on an empty pair of tennis shoes, the laces of which had been removed by a female jailer with ferocious eyebrows. She had taken my picture

and asked the policeman, "What'd this one do?" But he was busy writing something on a notepad and didn't answer. I didn't either. Soon I was following her down the hall, my feet scuttling across the painted concrete, trying not to escape my sneakers. She closed a solid metal door behind me. An aluminum mirror hung above an aluminum sink and toilet. The mirror was so scratched I could only discern my face in distorted strips of color. And I wasn't alone in the cell. I tried not to look at him. I sat down, took off my shoes, and made a crude pillow of them. He was murmuring when I entered, and he continued to do so. Somehow, he murmured me to sleep. When I awoke, I was still in the cell, but I had rolled over. And there he was, sideways in my vision, sitting Indian-style in the corner, strings of gray hair draped across sharp whiskers and a crooked nose, murmuring through closed eyes. His fingers were interlocked prayerfully in his lap, but twitching, and these murmurs were ungodly. He shifted and raised his head, revealing feline eyes. When he widened those eyes and begun trembling with cruel laughter, no physical reaction was appropriate to the intensity of my fear. I could only roll over, and hear him, until morning. It was an evil, and something like hell I imagine. And my father, red-eyed and a picture of defeat, having to come to such a place to retrieve me, this too was an evil.

Alan hadn't seen it. Alan was in my recliner having made saints of us all.

"What about what Jesus said about hell?" I asked him. I now have more questions, better questions, but at the time, all I could think about was Jesus, and His love, the purest form of love, and that love, even at its purest, must utter of "weeping and gnashing of teeth." He remained quiet, and, to my shame, I had grown angry, disgusted with his weakness. We had already encountered these questions. They were not new.

They were not going to pull me apart. Why was I the only one learning the Cardinal Virtue of *fortitude*? We had both read about it in the cave. What's more, I'd not be disloyal. I'd not betray my Christ. I'd not betray my brother in Christ.

“And what about Curtis?” I asked him. Curtis was a musician with a taste for Whitman and the glories of this world, but he was now on the brink of things, the glories of another world. Why were we going to such trouble to reveal to him the truth, when the truth was irrelevant, if even existent? “Have you thought about him?”

“He believes the same as me, Mark.”

“No,” I answered and shook my head. During our first meeting by Lost River, Curtis did say, “I hope I never tell anyone else that what they believe is wrong”—which was very beautiful, very gracious and tolerant, and also completely empty. What if a man believes he can live eternally in a cave without food or water, sustained only by an ethereal orange glow? What if a man believes he can swim to the bottom of Lost River—an endless blue hole—and there live in deep, airless tranquility with the mysterious fish that have no eyes? No, a man will drown in tolerance, and we had made headway since then. We had read the opening chapter of *Mere Christianity*, accepted the Natural Law, accepted the existence of good, of evil, of lies, and of the truth. Of darkness and of light. Curtis had indeed come to recognize the logic in it all.

“Alan,” I searched for something else to say, “You don't love anyone more than Jesus. You—even knowing so much—you don't know everything.” It was one of the truest hypocrisies I've ever spoken. “Couldn't it all be pride?”

He sat up straight, his face, not given to emotion, was a picture of suffering—
“Yes!” He leaned back in his seat, but he didn't relax.

We sat there in silence for a while.

“You can’t pick and choose your Jesus, Alan. You can’t make Him what you want Him to be. Jesus said, ‘I am the way the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except by me.’ It’s your favorite Gospel, Al.” Then I sat there in the fullness of what I’d said, admiring it, waiting for it to bring Alan back from the edge. Waiting in its fullness. Waiting. Then a crumb of fear. I began to question it, remembering Job’s friends in the Old Testament, men who said all the right things, but at the wrong time. I considered what is inflicted on the truth when it is said—when we say it, when I say it—the wrong way, and at the wrong time. But before I could finish that thought—a thought I’ve now finished time and again—he raised his eyes from my hardwood floor and began to speak.

“You’re right. If I don’t agree with Him, I shouldn’t quote Him.”

I was empty, looking at the floor, and I shook my head in agreement.

Alan moved out before Mary Ellen pinned her note on the door to Raybould’s Dorm: *Dear Fellows, His journey is peaceful now, after a long struggle.* That afternoon, I stood on the sidewalk that wrapped around the side of the house, staring into the holly tree, staring at a mysterious leather work boot, deep inside the tree, barely visible, hung from a branch by its laces. Mary Ellen came around the side of the house with red-handled pruning shears, saying she had been meaning to clear us a better path for several days but just couldn’t get around to it. I was awkward and embarrassed, my presence unexplainable. And she surprised me again when I said, “I’m sorry about your father.” I hadn’t expected her eyes to redden. I figured she’d made her goodbyes long ago. She managed a “thank you” and started pruning. Once in my room, I closed the door and

didn't pull the chain over the sink and mirror. The soft afternoon light pushing through the ivory blinds was enough. I opened my notebook and started writing about the leather boot in Raybould's holly tree, trying to make it speak for something, perhaps Alan's absence.

He was not there to help me when she stopped me on the sidewalk a second time. Having been in my room and seen my shelves—Bibles, books about the Bible, book after book of explanation—she must have thought me some Oxford Cleric. I now knew I wasn't.

“But I can't figure it out—death. What need does it serve?”

I'd learned not to answer. I'd learned what answers can do.

* * *

Down front in the sanctuary, below the waters, a piano and organ balance the sides of a stage that had much more oak on it than it does now. A three-foot high oak wall with swinging oak doors on each side separated the front of the stage from the choir loft. In front of that wall and between the swinging doors, the worship minister and preacher sat on two oak benches during the services. The preacher preached behind a giant oak podium, five feet wide and perhaps as tall. And below him, off stage, two elders faced the congregation in oak thrones guarding both sides of the communion table. And no one wore their work boots to church. It was black leather, polished, or deep brown leather, polished. And if you didn't have the money for such shoes, you probably didn't come, and if you did come, you certainly didn't sit on one of the thrones. Thankfully, that's all gone now, except for the table. In stages, the wall went, the benches went, the giant podium went, even the choir went. And just months ago, I

personally removed the thrones. But back when I gave the Good Confession, I gave it on crimson carpet before what seemed a veritable oak fortress.

* * *

I was in Troughmans's office after an evangelical ex-mafia-hitman with shiny black hair and a slick black button-up shook me to my core. A Campus Crusade for Christ participant, I handed out flyers all evening: *Tom Pampino: Former Mafia Hitman – A life story – After the football game in DUC auditorium – Question and Answer session to follow*. It felt good to be on the giving end of such a flyer, reassuring. It felt good to call and invite Curtis to come. An hour into Pampino's testimony, when he asked everyone in the entire auditorium to stand up, I was on the brink of quite a different sensation.

"If you're *sure*," Pampino said, reaching forward and clutching the air, "beyond a shadow of a doubt, and I don't mean ninety-nine percent sure, I mean one hundred percent sure, no doubt, that you are going to heaven when you die, then and only then, you may sit down."

A low rumble swept the room as ninety-five percent of those in attendance took their seats. I felt the most powerful physical sensation run through my body, starting at the nape of my neck and descending, fast, to my knees, almost as if my spirit was sitting down alongside all the other faithful.

But I was still standing.

Pampino asked this small remnant, of which both I and Curtis were a part, to make our way forward, down the aisle, down to the front of the stage, where we would bow and pray with him the sinner's prayer—admitting our sins, admitting Christ's

adequacy to wash them away, surrendering to Him our very lives, and finally, at long last being saved.

The next day, in Troughman's office, I asked if he would've sat down. "Yes, but only because I've heard of that tactic before, and to avoid being singled out."

And I would ask my father too. "Now, yes. When I was your age, probably not. But show me one place in the Bible where it says you need to recite a *sinner's prayer* to be saved."

For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified,

And it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.

Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ.

Dad was only the arm that lowered and raised me from the water, and not the Savior, but all the same, the suggestion that my baptism—and the belief it had confirmed—did not seal my salvation was upsetting.

"Mark," calmly, sincerely, "How much more do you really know, now, than you knew then?"

I didn't answer him. I felt I knew less.

In DUC auditorium that night, I felt I knew nothing at all.

After an official congratulations from Tom Pampino, and several backpats and handshakes of encouragement as we made our way back up the aisle, Curtis and I left the auditorium in a daze. It was raining hard outside, as hard as I've ever seen or felt, but no lightning, no thunder, and—we soon discovered—no umbrellas. So we agreed to run, splash for a full ten minutes up the hill, Curtis slipping once and landing in a pool of muddy water, blades of grass floating and sticking to his laughing face as he stood up and

wagged his head. We ran past buildings and over stone walls, as crooked a line as we could manage, passing Henry Hardin Cherry, whose greening bronze suit shone silently in the rain and streetlight. And at last, we were under the tiny porch of Raybould's Dorm, laughing under a single hundred-watt bulb Father Dale had helped Mary Ellen install that afternoon. We were both entirely wet, our blonde hair like tangled strips of tattered, silky ribbon.

* * *

After I'd made the Good Confession, Dad hung the mic on its stand beside the table and led me out the door nearest the organ. We wrapped around the back of the choir wing, turned a full right, and climbed the high stairs, arriving in the dressing room above the organ-side choir wing. I took a white robe into a little booth, and undressed above perhaps three-hundred people who knew I was undressing. The only thing separating me in size eight underwear from their view was yet another small room above the organ where the right-side loudspeaker was hidden.

At this point in the video, the congregation sits quietly, and waits. They stare at the stained glass medallion over the water—a donation “In Memory of Our Mother Sophronia.” Bold yellows, blues, and greens, it is Christ's profile kneeling in Gethsemane. His fingers interlock prayerfully, except for his little-fingers, which lay straight. His hands and the tender side of his forearms rest gracefully on a boulder that looks more like a brooding thundercloud. His head leans gently back, eyes open, robe marigold and sash crimson. On the medallion, Gethsemane is serene, if ominous. *He fell to the ground and prayed that, if possible, the hour might pass from Him. “Abba, Father,*

everything is possible for You. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what You will.”

IV.

I am again on the other side of a desk, now in Nashville before a tight-jawed, well-dressed publisher with a nervous twitch in his left eye. His fingers are steepling. I am on the edge of a seat with armrests, trying not to bump my guitar against them. My right hand is strumming. My left hand is making various shapes, pressing the strings in a variety of complex positions, seemingly against my will—I don't understand how it operates with such precision. I am scared of it. I fear it will betray me. And my voice is singing, it too a thing strange and independent

For such a great big world, just a few've got the Fire in their eyes.

Next one I see, I'm askin' him why, Mister, why

did you get the Fire?

Cause you look alive.

“It’s beautiful. Not a flaw in it. Precise, well-composed, even eloquent.” He is nodding, leaning forward, looking down at the typed lyrics on a sheet of paper.

“Play another.”

I nod, put the pick between my teeth, and wipe my hand on my slacks.

I am playing again, singing

Dale played Danny Boy and Greensleeves for the devil late at night.

But when Preacher asked, it was a deed that Dale denied.

He said, “My banjo’s been out in the shed six years,” and that was true, but what he didn’t say’s that he’d been out there too.

“Again, it’s great. But who’s going to sing it? Besides you, I mean.” He is steeping again. “Another.”

I shut off the Braves game and sat there staring at the TV.

The screen’s all dark and dusty, it don’t shine.

Man, that’s better anyway, it blurs my three-day beard and shame.

I wonder how she’s doing, hope the boys are both okay.

I hung my head and peeled the label off a fifth of Southern Comfort, then I rolled the empty bottle across the floor.

Smoked a stale Marlboro Red, crushed it out, and crawled to bed.

Cried and tried my best to pray, but the words were all in vain.

‘Cause I ain’t had one good thing left to do

since the day that I left you, since the day that I left you.

*I ain't had one smart word left to say
 since the day I had my way, since the day I had my way.
 I'm the low-rent ex in Apartment J.*

“Okay. Now, this—” he says, nodding, tapping the lyric sheet with an approving forefinger. “This one’s different.”

*

I am again between the stage and the first pew, standing on crimson carpet, now in a tuxedo.

Her Dad whispers in her ear, “You’ll always be my princess,” then places her hand in mine, “Treat her like a princess.”

The communion table has been moved to the Kum Join Us classroom, but only so Nicole and I may ascend these stairs in unity, centered between the ivory banners on both sides of the baptistery—*Together in Christ* and *United in Love*. We are centered beneath the baptistery itself, and Gregg is smiling, his Bible open in his hands. And Jesus is serene, kneeling in Gethsemane. But in this moment, I do not mind. It is an icon, imperfect but nostalgic.

And we say things we mean before a great cloud of witnesses, smiling in approval.

And we don’t know what we’re getting into.

But we will go there together.

*

I am on the other side of a folding table in the Kum Join Us classroom. They no longer meet in the chapel, the aging group having so dwindled that a folding table and a

handful of chairs will now suffice. But at least they can see each others' faces when they gather.

Mark Hardin has now led the worship for nine years. And it is time for him to move on. He sits beside me in a chair, supportive and relieved. And the current chairman of the Elders' board is asking me what I think about returning to E'town.

I tell him the truth. That it was never in my plan. That Bowling Green is a good deal closer to Nashville. But that if God is asking me to be here for a while, then here is where I'll be.

*

Hayden Vicks is alone, in the dark, on the first pew, his head still bowed long after everyone else has taken the emblems, the cup, the bread, long after they have filed out into the coolness of Good Friday. We have just watched Christ being scourged on the big screen down front, and it looked nothing like Mother Sophronia's medallion.

Hayden, just weeks ago, sat in the presence of thirty other men, elders, deacons, and ministers, and said my hiring had been a "great travesty." Within the first few weeks of my tenure, he knew that the oak barriers, the organ, the hymnals, and now the thrones beside the communion tables would never return. He voiced his resignation, scooted back from the table, and left the room, alone.

Carroll Knight's silhouette is in the back of the sanctuary. I am where he asked me to stand, down front by the organ, in case anyone had questions, needed to cope with what they had seen. Behind Carroll is the soft light of the lobby, and Alexis waiting patiently. For the past few days, they've been planning Bart's ordination service. At lunch with Carroll and Bart in the Silver Palace—a Chinese buffet just blocks from

Oakwood Drive—Bart asked me to put together the song service for it. I said it would be an honor.

Hayden stands, wiping his nose with the back of his hand, and we make eye contact. He starts to turn away, exit towards Carroll and Alexis, but he falters, and he turns, and he walks my way.

“I’ve never seen such cruelty.”

I only nod.

“How could anyone endure such pain?”

And I do not answer faith nor fortitude. I can only say, “But He did.”

And nothing more.

*

We have just sung the decision song. Carroll still slips and calls it the invitation hymn sometimes. We have prayed and closed with an inspiring chorus I pray will carry us through the week

Forever God is faithful,

Forever God is strong,

Forever God is with us,

Forever.

I run up the balcony stairs but I’m too late. The Fitz brothers left during the decision song. It’s just Geoff and Julie chatting with Dad. I wanted to say it was nice to see them.

*

I am sitting in their living room, but not trying to explain anything. I am not trying to explain why their favorite son—himself a great pianist, his agile fingers all chance and imagination, himself creator of an unfinished screenplay—*Late Night Skywatcher*, himself a pilot of single-engine aircrafts, himself the university mascot, himself the humble evangelist of his fraternity, himself the singer for our first dance in the sky, and later, our first dance as man and wife, himself a beautiful beginner, and a spoiler of endings—would do this cruel deed, to himself, and to us.

And I will not write about it now.

Just that, by now, I have learned a few things, been immersed in both Christ and this world, and as I sit in this living room, among the dead, in the hollowness of a desperate father's voice, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.

“If there is a God, He is cruel.”

And I am silent.

“He is cruel, and He has run my faith through a shredder.”

And I am silent, but my voice whispers, “In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.”

Nothing more.

*

*I lace my worn-out Nikes up,
every night when I get home around ten thirty.
And I tie this old bandana 'round my hair,
I know it's long, but it ain't dirty.
And the people in this town don't understand.*

*From their cars, they laugh and call me Runnin' Man.
 But they don't know, half my story,
 If they did they might slow down, step out, and join me.
 We're all runnin'.*

*

He is back from Chicago, and back from the hills. And we are in his apartment,
 which is hardwood, and sparse.

He asks about the wedding.

I ask about school.

We do not pray together.

*

Sometimes, I whisper in the dark.

"Nicole?"

Nicole, my wife, do you know I am afraid?

"Nicole, are you awake?"

*And when she doesn't answer, there is only the blackness of an empty room, and a
 ghost in the corner—but I will not speak of him, nor the blood on his temple. I will close
 my eyes, go somewhere endless, and speak another Name.*

*Dear Jesus, You broke the bread and poured the wine—it was Your body, given
 for me. I love You and You love me.*

V.

Backlit, the easiest way to discover a kid hiding in Gethsemane was to turn on the light from the switch in the sanctuary, perhaps exposing an awkward silhouette, arms and legs quivering in every direction. We now leave the screen down throughout the services and even the downtime between, displaying Bible verses, women's group invitations, and various activity schedules, all of which are more edifying than Mother Sophronia's medallion. The screen is raised for baptisms.

At length, I followed Dad down into the baptistery. He was not a preacher. He was my father. And I, not usually timid, had timidly asked him to do this great deed. *Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.*

So he led me, wearing rubber wader-overalls and a white robe that floated momentarily then sunk with him as he descended into the pool. I followed. I don't remember turning, looking through the foot-tall strip of aquarium glass and down upon

three straight columns of people, sitting still, all eyes forward. I only remember the heater being broken and the water cold. He raised his right hand and reminded everyone why he was doing it. “Mark, because you believe, I baptize you now, for the remission of your sins and that you may receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” He then lowered his son into the water and raised him anew.

You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.

The piano played the last line, *but for eternity*, as an intro. As the congregation started singing, we dripped our way up the steps and out of the water. Back up in the high room behind the speaker, he hung up his robe and stepped out of the waders. Then he held me tight and told me how proud he was, “I love you, Mark.”

He’d say that same thing nine years later on the way home from my night in jail. He’s always been a better Daddy than I’ve been a son. He’d deny that, by the way.

I was small, white-robe sticking, soaking wet, but I could tell a big difference between this kind of pleased and the kind he felt when I got down on a grounder or threw over the top. He never talks about my winning double against the Indians, a rival of both son and father. But twice, he’s reminded me that the most important decision I ever made, I made when I was nine.

He reached into the pocket of his blazer for a dry pair of underwear, size eight.