

# **Between the Sea and Forest Deep**

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## Chapter I

*Summer camps make poor homes.*

This mantra cycling through his inner ear, Webster Harris cursed the aged Kenmore refrigerator and pulled a moldy half-block of sharp cheddar out from the drawer specifically suited for cheese and meats.

*Damn it.*

He was initially charmed to find that the clergy cottage's fridge was a near-identical sibling to his grandparents', a thirty year old contraption that suited their similarly outfitted ranch house in Columbia. Fourteen months and many prematurely spoiled food items later, the charm had faded. The cheddar had been in the fridge for less than four days, but the way that mold had claimed it within its blue, furry grasp was symptomatic of the appliance's impending death. Still, it was better than no appliance, which was an impending challenge compounded by the fact that, as Dart Moyer had put it so matter-of-factly, there were zero dollars in the camp fund for replacement fridges. Now, Webster straddled the line between anger at his choking Kenmore and resignation to the inevitability that he would be eating from the camp's cafeteria, every meal, in a week's time. Unless, he mused, he could recruit one of the summer camp staff more wise to practical mechanics, like Byron or Weston. And there was always Peter Albers, but Webster didn't much care for the idea of being openly mocked by the camp's head of facilities. Apparently, Albers had only to hear that he was from the upstate before the man decided he was a liberal heretic.

Webster glanced at the clock above his kitchen window, clucking out the seconds. Five till six. The dining hall would be all laid out at this point, the cabin assigned to setup would be

waiting in their assigned seats, and the roar of one hundred and ten middle-schoolers would be set against the ten counselors trying to keep them in line. There was an order to things, he knew, a chaotic ritual that included sung prayer (usually the doxology set to one of many themes from vintage television shows), rhythms beat onto tables by dozens of hands greased with sunscreen and bug spray, and the incomprehensible vernacular of camp slang. It was no mystery to Webster; a childhood full of camp summers and the previous summer as camp chaplain had taught him well in the liturgy that encompassed the culture of Camp St. Jude. He decided against trying to salvage the cheddar for a dinner of grilled cheese sandwiches.

Webster closed the fridge, tossed the ruined cheese into the trash, and then crossed out of the kitchen and into his bedroom. There he retrieved his sunglasses and walkie-talkie from his bedside bureau, then left the cottage.

Webster stepped out onto the boardwalk that laced between all of the buildings in the camp, excluding the dining hall and infirmary twenty-odd yards back into the woods on the backside of the beach-bordering camp. Webster stood for a moment to look at the cottage, a house with two bedrooms, a bathroom, and interconnected kitchen and living room. The sun, its light broadly and gently spread over the camp in its latest afternoon shine, drew attention to the cottage's warped wooden sides, the solemn gray paint flaking off in pancakes, and the peculiar slant a failing foundation had given to the whole structure. Behind the peeling and disintegrating screens of his small front porch lay indigo shadows, held like secrets from the ending sun's inquiry.

*Thanks for that, Melton, Webster thought. Thanks for leaving me out here, my lot cast with a rotting summer camp and a bunch of fundamentalists and charismatics.*

He walked down the boardwalk's descending slope to where it became packed sand leading to a dirt trail into the forest. The forest canopy was so thick that he could already see artificial light emanating from the lamp posts that marked the trail down to the dining hall and, farther down, the road out of camp. Giant live oaks stretched their extremities over the trail, giving the impression that the trail was a tunnel leading into a realm of gloaming darkness. The smell of chicken tenders and macaroni wafted out. He wrinkled his nose in disappointment.

*Yeah, forget it, he thought. I don't care. I'm nearly done with this week, I'm practically done with these kids, just gotta do the come-to-Jesus stuff tonight. It'll be fine, easy. No, I'm not going to cheapen it, it's important stuff for kids in today's world, surrounding by so much banality; culture is a wreck. Like this camp.*

*God, I hate chicken tenders.*

By the time he reached the dining hall the children had flooded through the narrow entrance and taken their seats, assigned at the week's beginning for the sake of efficiency and order. It was especially important with the middle schoolers, who were most apt to divvy themselves into factions and cliques. Webster had forgotten how cruel kids can be to one another; being a chaplain acted as a powerful restorative to memory.

His eyes adjusted to the punch of fluorescent lights as he strode into the sound and fury of the dining hall. Middle-schoolers wove together as they left and arrived at tables, carrying trays laden with steaming bowls of processed chicken, macaroni and cheese, and green beans drowning in butter. A few voices rose above the fray; those counselors with dominant presences shouted out instruction and rebuke, getting into shouting matches and imitating animal calls. One of these voices shot towards him.

“Father Web!”

Lorna Kendall's hand waved violently at him from the staff table at the end of the hall, where the chaplain, camp director, camp director's family, and off-duty counselors sat apart from the campers. Webster waded through the tides of pre-adolescents and took a seat at the end of the low-lying table. Facing him directly across was the bespectacled, deeply tanned face of Lorna.

"How're you doing, Lorn?" he asked.

"Great!" she said. "I'm probably going to die of sleep deprivation before tomorrow, but this week has been *awesome*." Webster couldn't help but notice that Lorna said the word without the slightest hint of self-consciousness. She was a paragon of earnestness, and Webster knew he couldn't fault her for that. Not that he wanted to; many earnest people easily came across as naive or grating to Webster, but not Lorna. She was sincere without any sort of self-interest or attention-seeking. He didn't even mind that she called him "Father," a habit of Episcopalians that was, in his mind, more than a little paternalistic and authoritarian. Besides, he wasn't even an ordained priest yet, but only a deacon. The bishop of the Upper Diocese of South Carolina, Halloway Marmond, had decided Webster needed a little bit of tempering in matters of practical ministry, and had promptly handed him over to the bishop of the Diocese of South Carolina (which, predating the Upper Diocese, only consisted of the state's southeastern half), Clark Melton. And now, Webster was here, spooning green beans onto a faded blue plastic plate, speaking with the disarmingly pretty head counselor.

"Yeah?" Webster cocked his head forward so that his brow was pointing straight at Lorna. "How so?"

"The girls in my cabin are amazing. Like, none of them came in knowing one another, and now they're all inseparable! And I had two girls accept Jesus last night! Both of them were

super not-thrilled-to-be-here at the beginning of the week, but I really think God has revealed himself to them in some *awesome* ways.”

That word again. Already Webster began to feel familiar guilt over his grumpiness and anger at the refrigerator. He found it so very ironic that he, the deacon with three years of theological schooling, was constantly being shown up by the counselors in fruits of the Spirit. Lorna, for example, was full of more joy in this one moment than he had felt collectively in the past year.

“That’s exciting to hear,” he said. “How’s the homesick girl doing? What’s her name? Tina?”

“Tiffany?”

“Yeah, her! How’s she doing? Will you pass the mac?”

Lorna handed him the near-empty bowl. “Tiffany’s one of the girls who accepted Jesus last night! I swear, I’ve been a counselor for five summers and I’ve never seen a turn-around as crazy as hers. God is so good.”

“Amen to that, Lorna.” Webster emptied the bowl. “Excuse me, please; I just killed the mac and cheese.”

“Oh, hey Web,” called the raspy voice of Dart Moyer, seated with his family to Webster’s left. “While you’re up, could you refill the chicken too? I just killed it.”

“Sure, Dart.”

“Thanks!” Dart returned to attempting to persuade his one year old, Amelia, to eat two more spoonfuls of green beans.

Webster took the two bowls and rose to walk towards the kitchen. He passed through a set of open double doors and was greeted by a sudden surge of heat, courtesy of the poorly

ventilated room. Maxine greeted him with a brash “Web!” which her Gullah accent sounded out as “Wabe.” She was one of the several ladies from nearby Johns Island who worked in the kitchen with Chef Steve. When Webster first arrived at the camp for his first day, Maxine was the only living soul on the property, having spent the day performing the grueling task of kitchen inventory. Webster had come at dusk and, finding the camp quite deserted, sought out the nearest light source that wasn’t one of the flickering orange trail lamps which bordered the road and the boardwalks. He found a strong cast of shadows splayed against the road, the light which gave them form glowing from the dining hall. Upon entering the hall he had only to follow the sounds of Barry White emanating from the kitchen before he found Maxine, busy with a clipboard in hand. He offered a “Hello” that was greeted with a shudder and scream from her, who dropped her clipboard and threw herself back against the industrial-sized breadmaker. His ensuing apologies and explanations took a good deal longer to calm her down than he would have thought necessary, but he supposed the sudden presence of strange men in isolated places was reason enough to go into shock. Still, Maxine had never let that go, and consistently brought it up as the most interesting part of their relationship.

“Still trying to kill me, Web?” she said.

“Always, Maxine. You know me; I’m only here to give people heart attacks. Speaking of which, I’m gonna need more chicken and mac.”

“Well that real nice. What you want me to do about it?” Maxine looked at Webster with a teasing smirk.

“Please,” he added.

She laughed. "Here boy, give those bowls here." She started to refill the macaroni with a large plastic scoop. Steam rose from the pan as she shoveled out the pasta. "Oh, Web, Miss Carmen's been saying she need to talk to you about something been on her mind."

"Yeah? She say what it was?" Webster already knew the answer to that. Carmen was the kitchen's morning supervisor, a woman well-suited to the task of management, which she performed primarily through intimidating glares. She and Webster rarely exchanged words, she being loathe to talk about anything without very good reason, and he knew that if she had something to say to him, it was for him alone.

"Naw, but she been under the weather a little bit recently," Maxine said. "Came in Tuesday but left around nine all sick and like. She call in sick yesterday too, but came in this morning. I talk to her at the lunch shift, and she seemed real eager to get out."

Webster nodded as he took the replenished bowls. "Interesting. What time would be best for me to come in tomorrow?"

"Breakfast cleanup done around nine, nine fifteen. You can come in then?"

"Yeah," he said, "The closing ceremony's at ten thirty, but I should be able to stop by. And it was me she was asking for, right? You're not just pushing me at her because I'm the priest around here?"

"Oh no, she asked for you alright, she was just in a real hurry and didn't wanna go searching for you."

"Fair enough. Thanks Maxine." Webster returned to the table and was harassed by Dart for taking too long with the bowls. He sat back down across from Lorna and, serving himself chicken tenders and adding to his small, cold pile of macaroni. He shifted in his seat, an uncomfortable plastic stool connected to the table, and glanced at Lorna. He could not help but



notice her face was attractively alight, a contradiction whereby the darkening of skin can add a brightening of countenance. She was quite pretty, her face round yet not formless, blessed with strong cheekbones and dark eyes. Her hair, the color of teak, was streaked through with natural highlights and defined by the sun. His mind drifted downward, thinking that her oversized t-shirts disguised her well-defined form and no, he needed to stop this. He needed to deny his lower stratum, always greedy, always horny, always dragging him to a place of sweetness he left with a terribly bitter aftertaste. Webster Harris was the chaplain, twenty-seven years old and alone, his last girlfriend a long-distance relationship between Atlanta and rural Tennessee that crumbled in the midst of his theological schooling. He was at a disadvantageous age for a camp chaplain, not young enough to be cool and not old enough to be fatherly. Lorna was twenty-three, the oldest of the counselors, but even with her he felt wrinkled and used up. If only he was a bit looser in his affectations, less stuck in his own head. There was a pretty girl sitting straight across from him and he had no idea what to say.

Her voice drew him back out. "I can't believe it will all be over so soon. Only two weeks left. Time flies flies by, right?"

*Yes, it does, he thought, but the mind's conception of time speeds up as it ages, so it's not so much time that flies as it is we who fly. Time's pretty much just the bounds we put on our experience because the human brain can't really process eternity.*

"It sure does!" he said. He was glad he had chosen to not pour that whole reflection on time out on her. A gaggle of campers rushed by him with empty bowls and trays. "No running in the dining hall, y'all!" he called after them.

She laughed. "Yeah, I think about how long everything was when I was kid. A week of camp seemed like forever, like half the summer. I think I heard somewhere that time goes faster

as we get older, though. I feel like that's really sad. I mean, I love experiencing camp now, and it means so much more to me, so I wish time would go slower."

Webster realized he had, as usual, underestimated her. He stirred his fork in the green beans. "I'm sure that's not the case at the end of week, right? I mean, seeing how dead tired y'all get, I figure you'd be glad how fast time flies. Or, rather, how fast you fly through time."

"Fair enough, Father Web, fair enough." She took a bite of macaroni and washed it down with a gulp of sweet tea. "That is true, though. It's probably why childhood is so important, because it takes up so much time in our minds. We would probably go crazy if our adulthood were as stretched out as our childhood."

Webster swallowed a mouthful of chicken. "That's very true. It makes you wonder about that, though. Like, if our past takes longer, does that mean that there is *more* of our past than our future?"

A clacking of plastic sounded from down the table, followed by the plashing of liquid onto the floor. Dart's son Gus had spilled his drink.

"Blowout!" someone yelled. Gus began to cry.

Lorna sprang into her conditioned counselor mode, gathering up every loose napkin around her and scooping loose pieces of ice into them. She left to throw the wet napkins away and grab a paper towel roll from the kitchen. By the time she got back, Webster knew this tangent of their conversation had probably ended.

"Father Web, you were just talking like some philosophy majors I knew back in college. You studied English, right?" Lorna asked.

"Yeah, but being in divinity school flips your brain around like that," he said, "I mean, theology is pretty much philosophy dressed in robes and a funny hat."

Webster returned to the cottage with an hour to spare before he had to be at chapel for the final night of the session. There would be worship, led by the otherwise silent Caleb, and then he would get up and bring to a point the message he'd built up through the past week. Then the camp would take part in Holy Communion, followed by extended worship and prayer. If things got rowdy enough the Holy Spirit might show up and some kids would hit the floor. It had happened last summer, and there was a good chance it would happen before this summer was over. This was certainly the right place for it; the camp thrummed with a peculiar sort of holy energy, beating its wings like a thousand cicadas in the throes of mating. When Bishop Melton had explained to him that he wanted him out at St. Jude, he referred to it as "a thin place." Webster asked him what he meant, to which he responded that the camp, though overgrown, derelict, and distraught for funding, was a place where the presence of God Himself lay heavy, or rather human sense could more easily bore through the thick, cloudy atmosphere and see straight up into the third heaven like St. Paul.

Yet, as Webster had come to find, summer camps, even thin places, make poor homes. He had learned this much through the intermixture of a summer filled with screaming, singing, and sweating children and the subsequent fall, winter, and spring of utter desolation. The moment the activity and bustle and the warm bodies left, a chill came over the whole place. It slowed everything down and caused the heart to weary of the strange, deathly beauty of Spanish moss and driftwood. There were various church and school groups that came through the camp at a steady pace throughout the school year, but Webster had little contact with them. And it wasn't as if he could just leave, as Dart and his family would, and return to the real world. Bishop Melton made it clear his assignment was to be at the camp for the whole year round, until the powers that be decided that he could come home. But now Melton was dead and the new bishop,

a man named Warren Trexler, had shown little interest in St. Jude or the strange case of its unordained chaplain.

Despite all the prior education he received at Sewanee's School of Theology, Webster had felt in no way prepared for a summer camp chaplaincy. He was twenty-seven years old, no closer to feeling like an adult than when he graduated high school, and the weight of the camp's oceanic heat, termite-kingdom cabins, and heavy theological stridings were altogether too much for him to take. If given the chance, he could have addressed his issues and grievances by method individually, but he was given precious little instruction by the diocese and thrust into the forest four days before staff training started, told by the senile (he suspected) Melton to "see where God took him" in the sandy spit of land between the Edisto River and the deeps of Seavey Island's maritime jungle.

So he lived there. And he met regularly with Dart, a former youth pastor who lived with his family in the cottage next to Webster. And he spoke, taught, questioned, and sometimes even preached to the twelve college-age staff members. And then the campers came, and every night during chapel Webster told these children, whether they were seven or seventeen years old, that God was real and God was Love and that God loved each and every one of them. He told them that Jesus Christ was the *logos* of God, God in the Flesh, and that a relationship with Jesus was the best way to live life. Jesus made it possible to live a life free from the detrimental effects of sin, a word which Webster used haltingly, nearly tongue-in-cheek.

Webster himself wasn't so sure if he believed this. It was all a rather hard pill to swallow, the whole bit about *needing* to be in relationship with Christ. It was incredibly important, he had no doubt, but the dogma which necessitated it was the same dogma which lay behind such traditions as hell and blood atonement, traditions he suddenly found had rather intense staying

power in the Diocese of South Carolina. It was the difference of worlds, he thought, which separated Columbia and Charleston, the former his home and the latter his destined path. It was in Columbia, at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, that he had told his rector, Donald Warters, his post-college vocation was clear. It was in Columbia that a discernment committee had elected to send him back to his alma mater, the University of the South, to receive his Masters of Divinity. He was, at twenty-two, the youngest candidate for priesthood that had ever been approved by the Upper Diocese, partly due to his outstanding qualifications in church service, and partly due to the fact that the number of priests, particularly those under fifty, had dwindled with alarming steadiness.

Webster ruminated on this as he padded softly down to the beach. The sun was headed towards night, barely visible above the surrounding treeline, yet there was light aplenty that remained. Several pelicans glided over the water ahead with deceiving swiftness, and a breeze that carried the scent of salt and shrimp boats blew onto the beach, kicking up the finest of sand at points along the shore. All the charmed language he had heard to describe the beauty of the sea islands was, he felt, a poor representation of what he saw before him. While it was easy to make the beach and the ocean and the sky sound like they were perfect, untarnished pieces of God's artwork, Webster could not deny the grittiness of the sand, the detritus-laden murk of the water, and the air so thick with humidity that hang-drying clothes often had the opposite effect. This, he knew, was reality, the state of costly beauty, it being tactile and organic and caught up in the messiness of sex and shit. If Webster had learned anything over the past fourteen months, it was that beauty rested in the arms of difficulty and strife. Perhaps the theology of blood atonement, that a wrathful Jehovah demanded a human sacrifice for the sins of man, was not so barbaric and outlandish after all. Perhaps this creation showed that.

A gnat squalled in Webster's ear. He plunged in a forefinger in hopes of crushing it. The camp was rife with heaving and squirming life, filling him conversely with transcendent hope and disturbed discomfort. When he ran the beach in the early cool of six-thirty AM, there were deer that glided effortlessly over the dunes and would stand stock-still at the sound of his approach, only to resume their feeding as he passed. He had never seen them bolt. There was also life of the kind he had found consuming his cheese, life that infested all the buildings with its slow rot and shredding decay. He looked at his hands, colored a darker shade of the same pale skin that had kept him wearing shirts to the beach and neighborhood pool until he was twelve. Tendons and veins, flecked with freckles and more ginger-brown hair than was necessary, rose out of the flesh like barrows. It seemed that he made up for a lack of muscle mass with body hair, which only thinned out on the top of his head and on his college beer paunch, which hung from his thin frame like a partially deflated beach ball. Webster looked towards the illuminated tree line further down the beach, bleached bones of long-dead trunks shining white in the sun. Once, so he had been told, there was a rather wide road through this screen, and the island was open directly to the beach to make for easy access to cargo supply. Of course, there was no plantation left to need such an opening, and the island had closed the gap, as if to hide what lay in its bosom from the indignant river. The forest was dark inside.

Sin demands blood.

Webster turned back to the estuary, his eyes drawn by bottlenose dolphins cresting to breathe. He had to be in the proper place for tonight, not thinking about what history may have marked this island with creeping rumors and bad ghost stories. A camp favorite was that of "Crazy Man Floyd," an escaped mental patient whose weapon of choice was an oyster shell.

There was a measure of truth to every legend, though, and the truth was that a death inhabited Seavey far greater than any swamp dwelling Michael Myers.

*Creatures of dust and water and God's breath*, Webster thought. *That is the nature of all real monsters*. He returned to his cottage to prepare for chapel.

## Chapter II

The chapel was old, older than nearly any of the other buildings at the camp. It was also in a state of precarious (so Webster thought) structural integrity. Over time, the growing sand dunes had supplanted the soil foundation, meaning that the pillars upon which the chapel stood were mounted on nothing more than sand. Surely, the sand was solid enough to keep the chapel from folding in on itself like a cheap tent from K-Mart, but every year the walls bowed outwards and the roof settled more weight on the front doorframe. This night, as the first session of worship reached a crescendo and the words of "Blessed be Your Name" roared through the packed building with complete sincerity, Webster found himself focused on the ceiling, which surged upwards into the shadowed rafters. He imagined the steep V of the ceiling inverting and driving itself and everything beneath it into the deep earth below.

*When the darkness closes in*

*still I will say*

*Blessed be the name of the Lord*

Caleb's voice rose over the rest with the aid of a cheap microphone. His eyes were closed, as they tended to be most of the time as he led worship. He stepped back from the mic and continued to strum his guitar as the song ended and various whoops and cries arose from the crowded campers and counselors. Some continued to sing in lowered voices their own songs; prayers and praise wafted through the room, weighing down as heavily as the setting sun outside. Caleb looked to Webster, who stood off to the side, and wordlessly communicated that it was time for Webster to come forward. The music stopped. Webster walked forward and received the microphone from Caleb. It was slick with sweat, the regular byproduct of the heavysset counselor's enraptured leading of worship.

"Hello everybody," Webster spoke low into the mic.

A shout of general acknowledgement met him.

"The Lord be with you," he said, signaling the beginning of the prayer.

"And also with you," came the response.

"Father God," he said, his eyes focusing on the cross above the doorway at the other end of the chapel, "Please be here tonight. Please come and fill this room with your presence, your Holy Spirit. I thank you, God, for the day, for the beautiful weather and awesome activities you've allowed us to participate in, here at this beautiful camp you've blessed us with. Please give us eyes to see and ears to hear your message for us tonight, this last night of camp. I ask that you, dear Lord, would bless each one of these kids with a sense of your love for them." He paused. A thought lighted upon his mind: *What God that loves these kids demands blood from them?* He pushed the thought away.



“Let us understand more fully the promise of the Gospel.” The Gospel. What the hell was the Gospel? The old specters of Luther and Calvin began to breach in. Again he pushed them back. “In the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.”

The teaching for the past summer had centered on the theme of joy, a topic that remained as elusive to Webster now as it was at the beginning of his planning, five months ago. Joy was not initially an abstract concept (he knew he felt it by a tightening in his stomach or lower regions), but a properly Biblical examination of it turned it into a nightmare to explain to kids thirteen and younger. What Webster had found was that nearly every time that joy was written about in the New Testament, usually by St. Paul, it was cast as the proper response to hardship. Take Romans chapter twelve, verse twelve, “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer,” or James chapter one, verse two, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.” Webster knew these were written to people facing some seriously heavy shit, as one of his fraternity brothers would have eloquently put it. Early Christians were considered cannibals and cultists, so they were hunted down in their homes and turned into supersized candles for Emperor Nero’s garden parties. The challenge of understanding the kind of joy which was meant as a response to that was more than considerable. On top of that, understanding joy paled in comparison to explaining it to white, upper-middle class kids raised in the Bible Belt, where the most persecution they faced were ultra-conservative Sunday school teachers, his own Mr. Matticks immediately coming to mind, telling them how the Antichrist was coming soon and they better get ready because he’s not coming from China or Russia, oh no, he’s coming from America. He’ll probably be Episcopalian.

Webster started by relating the final segment of a story of how he was wrongly accused of cheating his junior year of college. He slowly swayed on the balls of his feet, his mantra of

movement, until he finally broke into a pace back and forth across the stage. He had told them this story all week, starting with his friend, who, without his knowledge, had lifted significant portions from an old paper of Webster's for his own essay. This essay was for a class that just happened to be taught by the same professor. His original paper had been on Nietzsche's madness and was a standout in the class, so the teacher immediately recognized when familiar sentences and arguments began to surface in his friend's piece on the death of God. They were called before the Honor Board within the day. The ensuing process, which he had recounted to the campers over the previous nights, was painful and tedious, yet he had kept a positive spirit in this time of tribulation, and, as he would reveal tonight, his innocence was maintained by none other than the accusing professor.

This was how he had told the tale all summer, but the truth was deeper than that and made shallow by his slight obscuration of minor details. The prime example was that he was not entirely without knowledge that his friend was using his essay. He had, in truth, freely given it to him for reference on his topic, then ignored the obvious plagiarism during a rough draft read-through and assumed that he would change it later. There wasn't any active plagiarism on his part, only apathy and negligence. Now that he reconsidered the implications of telling the truth, he paused at the part of the story where the teacher vouched for her former student's innocence. Maybe he would redact his intentionally erroneous tale and reveal that he wasn't so guiltless. But then where would he tie in joy? How could he keep a resolved attitude of joy in facing his trials when his trials were fully deserved? It made no sense, and he couldn't properly bring it back round to his point if he diverged from his set path of convenient half-truth.

"So," he explained, "My joy was set on the sureness of my innocence, and by keeping to that source of joy I was seen through to the end of my trial. I know that a lot of you are facing

difficult problems at school, at home, at your church, but the power of joy is that it can affect your life for the better. When you know that you are living an upright life, you have nothing to fear; there is no fear in joy. So, when I sat in front of that table of teachers and said that I was innocent, I had the joy that truth was on my side. My fear wasn't an issue. Honestly, and y'all, I'm being honest when I say this, doing the right thing will make you so much happier in the long run than being selfish ever could in the short run. Mother Teresa once said," he paused, "Y'all know who Mother Teresa is?" The scattered movement of nods. "Mother Teresa once said that you should never let anyone come to you without making them feel better and happier. That's what a great life is about. Making people feel better and stronger. It's not about how much money you make, or how many cars you drive, but how many people show up to your funeral because you have touched their lives.

"And why are we gathered here? What are we doing just sitting around here? We should be out there, right? We should be out there making people better and happier! But this is the truth, y'all, I can't do that by myself, and you certainly can't either. We get tired and fed up. I mean, it's not easy to be nice to your little brother when he's broken into your Pokéman cards, right? Or being nice to, I don't know, *Lauren* at school when she talks about you behind your back? That's hard. Impossible, even. That's why true joy is only possible with God in your life."

He continued this way for some time, detailing how God, that magic word which made all bad sermons excusable, provided a joy beyond mortal means. Kids rustled and sniffed as his words flowed on and upward, and several times he had to remind himself that they were always smarter and more attentive than he gave them credit for. What he, a figure of authority (and he was now a figure of authority, like it or not), said to them had innumerable effects that would ripple through the rest of their lives. Their perception of God hinged upon how God was

presented to them, and if God was not the source of joy but instead the source of condemnation, then that is how they would spend the rest of their lives viewing him. The summer camp chaplain, along with his proxies, the counselors, was a lynchpin between childhood indoctrination and adult self-discovery.

“Joy is what we’ve been made for, not suffering. But suffering remains, because we’re human, and that’s okay. Life in God is life as a human, and Jesus came as a man so that we can know joy.”

The sermon came to a close and he invited the band back up to lead more worship while he prepared communion. The Lord’s Supper was served to the whole camp each session at the last night. It was well-earned by the preceding days of activity and bonding, and he never got tired of doing it. As a product of the Episcopal church’s liturgy and ritual, Webster had grown jaded to much of the passing motions that stood in place of actual worship, yet there was something in the breaking of bread and communal eating that brought refreshment to his mind. Caleb began singing “Heart of Worship” and the seated children slowly began, group by group, to stand up. Webster, with the help of Lorna and Trish, a redheaded girl whose theological fixations had immersed the three of them in marathon discussions on weekend nights, prepared the elements, the bread and the wine. In reality, the bread was cheap matzoh and the wine was grape juice; rumors of high school campers breaking into the wine had caused Dart’s boss to mandate that they switch to juice.

After the song was over, Caleb returned to his familiar interlude of ambient strumming, and the chaplain explained what the Lord’s Supper was and welcomed the campers up.

“Jesus said that when we eat this bread and juice,” he said, “we’re supposed to be reminded of all that he did for us. Remember, because of Jesus we have joy. When you eat and drink, think about that.”

The summer had taught the counselors how to regiment the children so that, row by row, they walked up the aisle, a stratification in the pond of bodies, received the elements, and returned via the outside edges of the room to where they were sitting before. As the middle-schoolers walked forward, Webster looked each one in the face, picking out those who had distinguished themselves over the past week. The boy with a broken nose and blond hair discolored by chlorine. The girl with the heavily freckled face and green eyes. The fat kid who compensated by being a cut-up. The other fat kid who compensated by saying nothing. The large-breasted girl who he heard many of the boys commenting on in some particularly juvenile terms. The homesick girl, Tiffany.

One by one they received the matzoh from him and split to either side to drink the juice from glazed clay goblets that Lorna and Trish held. Caleb’s strumming turned into the hymn “Come Thou Fount,” and the final session of worship began. As he finished serving the counselors the unleavened bread and turned to pack it up, he briefly thought about the possibilities that awaited during this time. Once, during the high school session last summer, a girl had started to speak in tongues, shouting out words that sounded chewed and only half-sounded. Instead of disrupting worship, it had only escalated the level of fervor in the room, and soon there were four or five other teenagers doing the same, or at least attempting to. The aftermath was a bevy of simultaneously confused and excited campers and counselors alike, and Webster, himself a skeptic of supernatural manifestations in the 21st century, was forced to muddle his way through an explanation of charismatic gifts of the Spirit. Other similar things had

occurred throughout both summers: there were reported visions, kids being overcome by the Spirit, and prophetic “words” passed among the counselors. Some of it was easily explained as psychologically induced, but other phenomena were not so easily passed over. There was the time when Caleb had told him that God was his true Father, and that however his own father had treated him, he was still loved as a son. He had never discussed his relationship with his father with any of the staff before, and even though father issues were common enough this proved unsettling.

A sense of sacredness rose in the room like a mist, a product of dust swirling in the dim light and the echoing tones of voices and strings bouncing about in the chapel’s eaves. The chaplain found that if he squinted his eyes enough, everything took on a color tone like tired sunlight.

He wondered: *Was this like the presence of the LORD in the Jews’ desert tabernacle? Is this the atmosphere in which their priests had to tie ropes around themselves, lest they be found unclean and be smitten? What sort of holiness lay in a tent that demanded such fear and trembling?*

The songs and prayers continued late into the night. He found himself praying for children whose names he never bothered to ask and whose faces he did not look straight upon. He returned to his cottage with his head in another world entire.

### Chapter III

Webster began the next day escaping from his dreams. A cavernous sleep had entrapped him within a series of false awakenings, the specific elements of which had dissolved out of his memory soon after rising. The ultimate surge out of sleep, which he brought about by diving into some great depth (or did he leap into the heights?), had caused him to wake to his bedside clock buzzing an alarm forty-five minutes after his appointed time of seven o' clock. Breakfast was in fifteen.

The shower was non-negotiable; he had neglected to shower the day before and had built up a potent musk, so any interaction with parents necessitated a cleaning of his body. The coffee was also non-negotiable; the stuff brewed in the dining hall machines was about as good as the bilge water that sometime spewed out of a pipe behind the kitchen. He had heard, several times, multiple counselors refer to it as "Satan's Piss." He brewed his own Dunkin' Donuts blend in a coffee maker that could have been as old as the fridge, and that morning it decided to follow the fridge to the grave. Webster, wearing a frayed pair of khaki shorts and a fishing shirt with the St. Jude logo on it, threw the towel he was using to dry his hair over his love seat and fumbled for the coffee pot. He grabbed a mug out of the sink and poured in steaming coffee past the safe, no-slosh point. It was only after he had left the cottage and was well on his way down the boardwalk that he swallowed a mouthful and promptly spat it out. His tongue tingled with the sensation of damaged nerves and coffee grounds settled into the crevice between his lower lip and gumline. A

group of campers, their counselor fussing at them for taking so long to clean their cabin, traipsed past Webster as he held back swearwords and poured his coffee out into the scrub.

“Morning, Web!” Dart called. He stood on the front porch of his cottage. His one year old, Amelia, wobbled behind him holding a sippy cup. “Something in your coffee?”

Webster turned and spit out grounds. He grimaced. “Sorry,” he said, “I think my brewer is broken.”

“Oh man, that’s the worst. Say, you want a cup from ours? We always have extra and I don’t want you to have to drink from the mess hall. Can’t have you stuck on the toilet while you need to be talking to parents.”

Webster nodded. “That would be great, thanks.”

“Yeah,” Dart’s face widened into his trademark youth minister smile, “Come on and visit! Gus is finishing up breakfast and there’s plenty left for a fifth. It’s waffle morning, y’know.”

Webster entered the Moyer cottage, relieved that he didn’t have to face the travails of dining hall pancakes. They were loaded with so much grease that they traditionally had a magnificent laxative effect on anyone who ate more than three or four. It was common knowledge among camp staff and veteran campers to keep to the fruit and granola on the last morning of camp.

Dart set a chipped plate of red ceramic before Webster at the table and handed him a fork and knife, both wet from having just been rinsed off. Web thanked him and forked a triple stack of waffles off of the plate in the center of the table.

“Gus, bud, would you pass Father Web the syrup?” Dart’s wife, Emily, called from the sink. The five year old, who sat next to Webster in an outsized t-shirt that read “St. Andrews



Parks and Rec,” hoisted the outsized jug of syrup over to his side. Webster grabbed it to douse the waffles. His hand came away with a palm covered in thick, sticky residue. Gus was sucking syrup off of his fingers. He looked at Webster like he was appraising a prize watermelon.

“Father Web, are you still living here when we leave?”

“Yep.” Webster stuffed waffle into his mouth. It was lukewarm but still fluffy, alighting on his tongue rich and buttery and delicious.

“Again?” Gus asked, his voice swooping up in disbelief.

“Yep, again,” he said. “It’s not so bad, though. I get to stay out here and sail whenever I like.” Gus’s eyes widened in jealousy. “And it’s really quiet all the time. Nobody like you to wake me up from my naps.”

Gus laughed and reached out to strike Web with a dense fist. “I’m gonna come visit you and wake you up from your naps every day, Father Web.”

“Yeah, and how are you going to get here?”

“Mom’s gonna drive me.”

“Nope,” Emily, now changing the trash bag, interjected. “That’s not happening.”

“Hah!” Webster pointed his fork at the five year old, “Looky there. I’m getting some sleep after all!”

“I’ll walk, then.”

“Every day?”

“Every day. Or I’ll get a boat and come up the river.”

“Oh,” Webster opened his mouth in an ‘o’ of feigned surprise. “So you’re a pirate now?”

“No,” Gus said, “I’ll buy a boat.”

“With whose money, I ask you?”

Emily swooped in and lifted Gus's plate out from in front of him. "Time to wash up, honey," she said. He slid out of his chair like an alligator down a muddy bank into the water below and toddled off to the bathroom. An errant shot of sun coming through a hallway window illuminated his hair to a shade of dark honey, edged with tints of pure gold. Webster's gaze jumped from this to Emily, still cleaning up the incomprehensible mess of food that only a little kid can create. Her own hair, damp and hanging loose, gleamed like a honey more strained and purified, and the dark sweatpants and tank top she wore only accentuated it. He remembered how kind she had been to him at the beginning of his time at St. Jude's, now over a year and three months ago, when he was dropped off knowing no one except Dart, who he had met only twice before. That first week was full of evenings spent eating frogmore stew and shrimp boil at Moyers' house, partaking of Emily's warmth and Dart's humor; even in Emily's late stage of pregnancy with Amelia, they never failed to open their cottage up to Web in his pangs of homesickness and hunger.

He forked the last of the waffles onto his plate. His tongue still felt singed from the overheated coffee. Dart, who was sitting on the couch in the connected living room and watching his daughter gingerly walk about, called out to Webster.

"Hey, Web, we finally figured out who's going to be camp manager after we leave."

"Albers?" The sudden image of thick glasses and a bushy mustache constantly moving with the chewing of sunflower seeds came into his head. Peter Albers was a charismatic, pentecostal, dispensationalist Episcopalian, and these radically different schools of Christian thought combined inside Albers' fevered paranoia of anyone who wasn't like him. Webster thought of him as Foucault's fear of the Other epitomized in a weed-whacking handyman.

*Pleased to meetcha; name's Peter. Oh, you got a headache? Let's pray that demon right outta ya. Don't feel better? Means you got unconfessed sin. Better pony up and get to praying; any day now the LORD's coming back. With fire. And a sword.*

“Albers?” Dart chuckled. “No, I love him to death, but his people skills are questionable at best. They’re actually here, right now. Camp staff. Take a guess.”

The chaplain chewed waffle and thought. It wouldn’t be any of the kitchen staff, as they all had off-season jobs working at a country club on Kiawah Island, serving retirees who wintered there. Out of the current camp counselors, there weren’t many options. Only one, really.

“Lorna?”

“That’s right, friend, old Lorna Doone herself. You’ll have Lorna and Peter for company over the next...” He counted out months on his hands. “Nine months. How about that?”

“It’s definitely better than last year, just me and McCormack. That was something else.” George McCormack was the Diocesan historian, and had spent the past year out at St. Jude’s acting as camp manager for the church groups that would come out every weekend. A retired lawyer and recent widower, McCormack was infamous for curmudgeonly behavior, and his time was primarily spent sifting through the camp office’s records. The actual duty of tending to guests had usually fallen to Webster, although this was a welcome distraction from the perpetual navel-gazing that his days had become. He was officially on the diocesan payroll to spiritually minister to the camp’s visitors, but out of the fifty-some groups that visited between August and May, none had requested his services. Instead, his days were spent sailing and reading, yet this idyllic life grew monotonous by late September. Lorna’s residency was more than welcome.

“Just don’t fall in love with her or anything,” Dart said, “I don’t want to come back and find out that you’ve used your powers of priesthood to marry yourselves. Or have you already fallen in love with her? Oh gosh, I’d have to call the oversight committee and everything.” He grinned like a panting bulldog.

Emily laughed. “Don’t pay attention to Dart, Web. He asked me out two weeks after I had started volunteering to help out with his youth group. That’s a big no-no in youth ministry, or at least it was at Christ the Redeemer.”

“Well, you never know,” Webster said, “I’m liable to fall in love with any girl who’s not McCormack. Especially if she doesn’t leave abruptly in the middle of February.” This was exactly what McCormack had done, meaning that the chaplain had to take over his responsibilities. Naturally, it proved a welcome break from the boredom, but the surrounding circumstances, and the swiftness, of the departure had been more than a little unsettling.

The sound of a small body hitting the floor came from the bathroom. Crying followed with unmerciful swiftness.

“Oh boy,” said Dart.

“I got him,” said Emily.

Webster looked at his watch. 8:27.

“I’ll leave you to take care of that,” he said. “Hope he’s okay. I better get going anyway. Thanks for breakfast, y’all.”

Emily looked back and smiled at him. “Anytime, Web.”

“Except in a week,” said Dart. “Since, you know, we’ll be back in West Ashley and everything.” Webster smiled and rinsed off his plate and utensils in the sink. He had promised to visit often at the end of last summer, but West Ashley was a good forty-five minutes away and,

despite the cabin-fever he contracted quickly after camp ended, he had visited them only four times. Grabbing his mug, now refilled with Folgers dark roast from the Moyers' coffeepot, he headed out the door and towards the dining hall.

He entered the hall from behind, using the kitchen entrance where trucked-in foodstuffs and supplies were carted through. Opening the ancient storm door, Webster smelled the mixture of sausage grease and cleaning agent that filled the kitchen. The kitchen operated on a fixed meal schedule that made food preparation easier, yet wreaked havoc on the digestive processes and nutrition of its campers and staff. The final morning of camp blessed departing campers with a legendary pancakes-and-sausage combination that necessitated many emergency bathroom stops on the trip home. Webster had been forced to adapt the previous summer by preparing most of his own meals with enough fresh produce and whole grains to counteract the fattening effects of camp food. Of course, this required a twenty-five minute trip to the nearest grocery store every week or so, but off-duty counselors generally made the trip with him.

Of course, with the dining hall shutting down in a week he would have to make more grocery runs, but his perpetual partner to the Piggly Wiggly would now be Lorna. This made the prospect rather enjoyable, not to mention the fact every other waking moment would be spent in the mostly-solitary vicinity of the same young woman, whose company he genuinely appreciated. Would he fall in love with her, as Dart had half-jokingly proposed? Probably. That was the way these things went, after all. Would he bring himself to make something of it? He would try, stumbling and awkward, hands too large for his wrists and his hair clogging the shower drain with alarming speed.

Webster could see kids filing through the front of the kitchen, returning bowls and platters and squeeze-bottles of liquid butter. Someone was shouting from the walk-in fridge.

James, Maxine's taciturn son, was preparing a mop bucket to clean the dining room. It was 8:32 and Webster had at least another half-hour before Miss Carmen would be able to talk to him about what she needed to, whatever that was.

Chef Steve was sitting in his tiny office, a cubby off to the side just large enough to fit his desk, chair, metal cabinet, and bookshelf cluttered with binders full of recipes and financial records, their fronts enameled in dust. They had clearly not budged in years. The chef used this office nearly every day, but dust piled up all around him, behind the computer, atop the shelves, without the slightest threat of being disturbed. Webster sidled into the room and leaned his hand on the top of the cabinet, which stood just inside the doorframe. He quickly drew his hand back to his side, his palm now covered in a patina of grease and dust. The chef, a short man of slight build, was typing out an email in a fidgety hunt-and-peck manner. He looked up at Webster and stroked his always-trimmed mustache.

"Hiya, Webster. Help you with something?" He spoke with the alarming speed of a prairie dog darting to its hole after a lookout has barked out the warning of an eagle overhead.

"Yeah. What are you doing here before lunch?" Webster asked. Chef Steve usually only came in at noon to relieve Carmen, who was in charge of breakfast and lunch prep. Steve oversaw lunch service, dinner, and cleanup.

"Carmen's not been feeling herself lately, so she asked if I could supervise breakfast today. It's a Friday anyway, so no dinner. I figured I might help her out. I have to file end of summer inventory anyway. You have any idea how much mayonnaise this camp uses in a summer?"

Webster grimaced. He hated mayonnaise. "Not really, no. But Maxine told me that Miss Carmen was out of sorts and I said I'd talk to her. Is she here?"

“I sent her to grab some produce for lunch today, but she should be back soon. She wasn’t doing much good around here, which, knowing Carmen, is odd. I can’t imagine why she wants to talk to you, though.”

“Right?” Webster agreed. “I don’t know her all that well, but I am the chaplain. That probably has something to do with it.”

“Maybe.” Chef Steve stroked his graying mustache. “I know she’s close with her pastor at her church, so I don’t imagine it’s anything intensely personal.”

“Where does she go?”

“Bethel AME, out on Johns Island.”

“Ah. When will she back, you think?”

“Any minute now. She left an hour ago. Went down to Miller’s out on River Road. Can’t imagine her taking longer than an hour.”

“Neither can I.” Webster shifted in the doorway uneasily, feeling as if he were blocking Chef Steve from his work. “I’ll let you get back to that inventory report. Actually, how much mayonnaise *did* we use?”

“Sixty-two and a quarter gallons.”

Webster felt a little queasy.

He exited out the storm door at the kitchen’s back end and waited next to the forest green dumpster that held St. Jude’s trash, kicking at gravel and thinking about his relationship with Lorna. That was, in fact, the majority of his relationship with Lorna: thinking. Webster internalized everything to a fault, turning simple conversations into tangos of emotion via retroactive analysis. It was, he knew, obnoxious, but it made for some great scraps of sentimental poetry, bemoaning the impossibility of love or the ambiguity of truth in this world. In the back of

his mind he acknowledged that it was mostly masturbatory drivel, but when he went ignored or untouched his heart felt such torsion that only poetic catharsis could relieve him. Masturbatory, indeed.

The heat of the day had started to seep in through the pine branches above; he remembered he still needed to talk to Dart about the refrigerator. Lorna would undoubtedly be moving into the Moyer's cottage, so he couldn't simply take theirs. As he puzzled over this the kitchen van, a white Chevy Astro with a faded Pepsi logo emblazoned on the side, came around the side of the dining hall and pulled in between the back entrance and the dumpster. Miss Carmen opened the door and climbed out with solemnity. She was a heavysset woman with skin the color of sun-baked brick, and she wore her emotions in her eyes, which were cradled by sullen folds of skin.

"Miss Carmen, how you doing this morning?" Webster called out.

She looked at him, her eyes tired, half shut. She spoke softly. "Been better, Web. I been better."

He offered to lend a hand. She assented and opened up the van's sliding door. Webster grabbed a wooden crate filled with plastic cases of grape tomatoes and turned to her.

"So I heard you haven't been feeling so well lately."

Carmen smiled in gratitude. "I'll say. I ain't hardly gotten sleep for the past three days. It's been trouble all up in my head."

"Maxine said you wanted to talk to me."

Carmen scowled. "Is that so? Maxine must be hearing things; I never said I needed to talk to you. No son, I don't believe I need that now. Just a little sick and tired, that's all."



Webster wedged his foot between the storm door and doorframe and managed to flick it open. He held it open with his back and waited for her to walk through, carrying a bag full of apples. He frowned and looked at her, immediately doubting her denial by virtue of her quickness about it. Perhaps Maxine had said something she shouldn't, but she never would say that Carmen wanted to talk to him unless she knew that it was true. While the kitchen ladies were wont to gossip about one another's lives with each other, none of them would say something like that to Webster without very good reason. After nearly two summers, he was still a relative outsider.

He followed Carmen into the kitchen.

"Trouble in your head sounds a little serious, don't you think?" He knew he strained his luck doing this. Carmen did not take to questioning well, and even Chef Steve usually deferred to her will, as unimpeachable as God's law atop Sinai.

"Like I said, just a head cold." She didn't even turn to look at him. He felt he better drop it.

"Alright, well, you be sure to let me know if you still need to talk about anything. Really. I'm all ears, no judgement." She *hmmphed* in acknowledgement. Webster motioned with the crate, "Where do you want this?" One of the morning cooks, Estelle, came up out of the pantry, thanked him, and took the crate from his arms. He stood there for a second, feeling a bit pointless, before Miss Carmen spoke.

"You need anything else?" Her mouth was pursed. She was beginning to show her wires snapping.

"No ma'am. I'm alrighty-rooty, don't have to ask twice. I'll be praying you feel better."

He left through the back of the kitchen, blushing thoroughly and, he realized in hindsight, in far too great a hurry for dignity's sake. He became aware that he was sweating profusely. He needed to get ready for the closing ceremony; time alone to steady and gather his thoughts before appearing before hundreds of parents, grandparents, and older siblings of campers.

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In his cottage he toweled himself off and changed into his other official camp shirt. His sweated-through one would dry quickly, given its lightweight material and the cabin's air-conditioning. Even so, Webster hated wearing damp clothing. He needed to get his mind someplace new after being so soundly rejected by Miss Carmen. Was that actually sound rejection? He couldn't be sure.

He sat down in the wicker easy chair and tried to calm his mind. Center himself. He paid heed to his surroundings. The chair in which he sat acted as his usual place of comfort. It was here that he read, wrote, and watched television during his many nights of insomnia. On the wall behind hung a watercolor of two boys in matching bathing suits and bowl cuts walking into the surf, their backs to the artist. Webster could never tell if the pastel color scheme was the painting's original form, or just the result of gradual aging and sun-fading. Directly across from him sat the glasstop coffee table, also made of wicker. Atop the glass lay his Bible. Maybe he should read his Bible. Reading holy writ was something he, a chaplain, was supposed to do on a regular basis, he remembered, a voiceless laugh forming in the back of his mind. Maybe if he was a Baptist, or a Presbyterian, but Episcopalians had never been known as avid readers of scripture, aside from that contained within the Common Book of Prayer, the great biblical stand-in for millions of God's frozen chosen.

He leaned forward and picked up the book, huge and bound in cheap, brown leather. *NIV Study Edition* was emblazoned across the width of the spine, while his full name in fading gold leaf, *Webster Rogers Harris*, detailed the bottom right corner of the front cover. The book had been a gift to Webster from his grandmother, venerable woman of the church that she was, when he was confirmed at age twelve. Confirmation was an annual church ceremony during which the youth of the church, generally at the age of twelve, made a public confession of faith and were blessed by the bishop in the laying on of hands. The preceding year was supposed to be spent learning about the central tenets and figures of the Christian faith, from Abraham to Paul, during a Sunday morning class, but Webster had missed most mornings due to his intense hatred of the class, particularly its teacher, Mr. Matticks. The man was a Bible-thumper, a breed of Episcopalian that was at the time either dying out or migrating farther south, and a strict disciplinarian. Once, when caught chewing gum, Webster was forced to spit it out into his hand and hold it until the end of class. Another kid, a boy named Charlie, wet his pants after Matticks wouldn't let him leave the room. The class was held in the church's boardroom, where the vestry usually met, around a huge table of varnished hardwood dating from the early 19th century. Matticks would stand at the head of the table, leaning onto hands planted firmly on either side of his huge King James, and expound upon the dangers of hell and wrath that awaited all present in the room. A self-proclaimed "backwoods Baptist," Matticks became an Episcopalian when he, as Webster recalled him saying, heard the Lord tell him to "scare the hell out of the city-dwellers."

"The Bible says that whosoever sinneth against the Lord will bear his own iniquity!" he had bellowed before the group of seventh-graders before him. "It don't matter who you are, you sin with every thought you make, and sin is a surefire ticket to hell. Think a bad thing about your

brother? Hell for you. Call your friend a bad name? Hell for you. Disrespect your mother or father? Hell for you.” At this point he had glowered and squinted his eyes until Webster thought they would shoot back into his brain from the pressure. “Say the name of *ALMIGHTY GOD* in vain?” He slammed his palm onto the open pages of the Bible, the onionskin sheets absorbing the sound with a muted *putt*.

“*Hell. For. You.*”

By this logic, Webster had reasoned, everyone he knew was destined for hell, including Mr. Matticks, who would pound the table or the arm of his chair and exclaim “By Jehovah!” or “Jesus’ blood!” for emphasis. The solution, the man claimed, was to repent by the minute, beg mercy before the Lord “like Jesus hisself in the Garden of Gethsemane.” But even then, he added, “as the Scriptures say, God was *pleased to crush him*.” So no sinner had a chance at redemption lest the good Lord pleased to save him from his own wrath. What a system.

Webster put the Bible back on the coffee table. He leaned into the chair’s cushioned back and closed his eyes. Were there ever comfortable words that came out of that man’s mouth? Words like, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,” and, “We have an advocate with the Father, who is Jesus Christ the righteous”? What about those words? What about the gospel, the good news? His head lolled to the left. The gospel that crusaders joyfully brought to Jerusalem, slaughtering its inhabitants. The gospel dictators, kings, and presidents alike so easily subverted to wield mass control and dominion. The gospel that bombed abortion clinics and promised damnation to starving children in the dusty, embattled fields of the Sudan. Life was suffering, so why should the “good news” he preached also cry aloud the suffering that a gleeful God would pour out over the reprobate sinners? Sinners who wandered the earth like worms beneath paving stones or rotting trees, felled by an ecosystem that was pleased to crush them. He

knew that, as he'd learned long ago, these rants against faith were sophomoric whining, but there seemed no escaping them.

“Good God,” he whispered now, to no one.

He opened his eyes. A knocking came from the front door. He looked up and saw Trish through the glass door, her red bangs pasted to her forehead by sweat. Webster glanced at his watch. 10:42. The ceremony started twelve minutes ago. He got up and opened the door. “Well shit,” he said, just as casually as he might have said her name.

“Er, yes, kind of,” she said. “Lorna stalled for time by showing the slideshow early, but it'll be halfway done by now.”

“Frick. I'm so sorry. Didn't even mean to nod off there, I just--I ran in high school. I can get there fast.” Before Trish could say anything else he was gone, pounding down the boardwalk toward the chapel. Not running on the boardwalks was the number one rule at St. Jude, and Webster became keenly aware of why as the boards shook and splintered beneath the impact of his feet.

He got there just in time for the end of the slideshow, the accompanying song a ballad by the Christian punk band Relient K. Although he had run for less than thirty seconds, Webster had already broken out in an oppressive sweat, not helped by the chapel's weak air-conditioning and the hundreds of people jammed inside. He squeezed through the crowd (standing room only) and found himself at the front just as Lorna was saying “And now here's Father Web to give y'all the lowdown.”

Now armed with a microphone, he looked at the crowd and breathed heavily.

“Whoa, it's hot in here,” he said. Someone offered a pity laugh. No one liked to stand through these things. The adults were here, ready to take their kids and leave. They didn't want

to listen to a priest wheedle on about how precious their children were and how much Jesus loved them.

But he wheedled anyway. He couldn't have spoken for longer than five minutes, but it felt like he was delivering a sermon to a church full of tired old men and women, some dreadfully thick and boring piece of theological academics that dealt with the peccability of Christ. He told a story about one of the campers, the homesick girl, and how watching her go from abject loneliness to wonderful friendships in a week was exemplary of all camp could and should be. Everything he said was lifted straight from what Lorna had told him, but it served his purposes to tell it like it was *him* who witnessed this marvelous transformation, lest it lose its credibility. It was much like a woman claiming God gave her a vision, or a hunter claiming he had seen a Tasmanian tiger deep in an island forest: a story's weight lay in the position of the speaker. God had done this incredible thing and I've seen it with my own eyes; look at how great God is! Webster finished his story and prayed a prayer. While he edged off to the side, Caleb came up front and sang the "Papaya Song" that closed every session of camp.

*I like bananas, I think that mangoes are sweet,*

*I like papayas (PAPAYAS!), but nothing can beat*

*The sweet love of God.*

After they finished, Dart got up front and dismissed the camp. All was sound and fury as several hundred children, men, and women funneled out of the chapel to pick their luggage up from their cabins. The chaplain stood there and exchanged brief pleasantries with familiar and unfamiliar faces alike.

A man with a huge canine smile and thick glasses approached him and claimed he knew his father. "Used to work for him back in Spartanburg. How's he doing now?"

“Fine,” Webster said placidly.

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An hour later he was at the dining hall, sitting between Dart and Caleb and eating a turkey club on a croissant roll. Caleb was talking about returning to University of South Carolina to finish his business degree and other things and Webster wasn't quite listening, only responding with affirmatives and half-words that might have been questions. Every thought that formed in his brain was foggy and uncertain, and Webster was beginning to wonder if he had actually ever woken up from his unplanned nap. Had he even woken up this morning? He pushed a potato chip into his mouth and chewed it. It crackled real enough. The sweet tea he drank down to clear his throat tasted real enough. *Not to fear*, the voice of his pragmatism spoke vibrantly, *These spells rarely last longer than a few days. You'll be ship-shape before the next session of camp.*

“You mean the last session of camp,” he said, aloud.

Caleb turned and looked at him mid-bite. “What was that?” he asked, his voice clouded by sandwich.

A muffled scream came from the kitchen, punctuated by a clattering and more clearly defined sobbing. Everyone turned to look in the direction it came from. They hovered in the stillness like rabbits listening for the dire sound of predatory wings. Within seconds Chef Steve strode out, his arms turned upward like he was preparing to push them all back down to their plates.

“Now folks, don't worry yourselves, no need to get up from your seats.”

“What happened?” The voice of one of the girl counselors, Claire, floated from the table behind Webster.

“Someone turned off the light to the walk-in fridge while Miss Carmen was in there. She’s tired to begin with, so she got a little panicked.” He started to back into the kitchen, but he stopped, paused, and then walked up to Webster. “Hey Web, you think you could come talk to Carmen? She asked for you.”

“Sure,” he said slowly. “Now?”

“Um, yeah. If it’s not too much of an inconvenience, that is.”

“No, not at all,” he said, and stood.

In the kitchen the ladies crowded around Carmen, seated on Chef Steve’s swivel chair and fanning herself, while James came out of the fridge. “Ain’t nobody in here,” he called.

Carmen rocked back and forth and shook her head.

“You hear that, honey?” Maxine asked while rubbing her back. “Like James said, ain’t nobody in the ‘frigerator. You alright, you alright.”

“I don’t believe it, Maxine.” Carmen shook her head while she stared at a point near Webster’s feet. “I know I saw him in there. I know I did. You can’t fool these eyes, not once you can’t. *Especially* not twice.”

Maxine looked at Webster, her eyes plaintive.

“Web, you tell her. Ain’t nobody in the refrigerator, right?”

Carmen’s scream had woken him up from the depressive stupor, but he couldn’t see why. He stooped down in front of the shaking woman. First step of relating to someone: get on their level.

“I’m sorry, Miss Carmen, but I don’t believe I know precisely what’s going on. Could you tell me what frightened you?”

“Carmen say she saw a man in the freezer,” Estelle said abruptly.



Maxine immediately silenced her. “Shh girl! Let Miss Carmen speak for herself!”

Webster tried to catch Carmen’s gaze. Step two: establish eye contact. “Miss Carmen, are you able to say what you saw?”

She looked at him for a second, then quickly looked away.

“I saw him again,” she whispered. “I saw the black man.”

“What you mean, Miss Carmen?” Maxine asked. “You mean like James?”

“No, not like James. James ain’t black like he was.” She hung her head; sweat from her brow intermingled with tears and dripped onto her apron.

“He was black like smoke from a grease fire. Black like night.” She drew her head back up and looked Webster in the eye. He felt the burning chill and the pucker of gooseflesh on his forearms. “I was in the freezer getting froze vegetables out to thaw for tonight, and I turn to get out and he’s just standing there, staring, ‘cept I don’t know if he was staring because his whole face was black, including his eyes. But I could feel him looking at me. I could feel him, like, in my heart, just crying and crying and screaming or something mad like that. And then...” She stared past Webster’s face into the middle distance.

“And then what, Miss Carmen?” he asked. His mind was blank; he didn’t bother trying to process the impossibility of what Carmen was saying, but simply listened. “What happened?”

“Then he says, he says to me with this voice just as real as you speaking just now, he says something like ‘What God you worship?’ Then he opened his mouth real wide and I saw only black inside and I couldn’t help it, I just start screaming. Like he was sucking it out of me. And then the light turns off and next thing I know I’m sitting here.”

She stopped fanning herself and held her breath. Webster could see the concentration in her face, a determination that lay behind her eyes to not cry again. She exhaled in a gust of breath and returned to her spasmodic sobs.

He rubbed her knee, covered in black kitchen scrubs, with a spidery, bristled hand and murmured “It’s okay it’s alright” until she breathed deeply and settled herself again. “Miss Carmen,” he said, “you said at the beginning you saw this man ‘again.’ This isn’t your first time seeing him, is it?”

A loud noise came from the front of the kitchen. Chef Steve, who this whole time had been buzzing about the kitchen, acting like he was doing things that didn’t actually need doing, snapped his crew to attention. “Hey y’all, they’re finishing up in there. We gotta get ready to take everything back in. Miss Carmen...” He paused, a rarity for him, and considered the situation. “How about you and Webster go back to my office? You two can talk about things back there.”

#### Chapter IV

Webster closed the office door and sat on a narrow open space on the desk between the computer and a filing cabinet. He wasn't going to try to squat anymore; his thighs already ached. Miss Carmen sat in the rolling chair and stared at the door, her eyes glistening.

The office seemed darker than usual; its usual warm cast of incandescence had been dimmed by the sudden, jarring thrill. The electricity of it all undulated from Carmen's nervous quivering, and Webster noticed floaters wriggling across his field of vision. He felt that the entirety of the tiny room was leaning in and focusing on what Carmen had to say.

"Alright," he said, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees, "I want to hear about what you've seen and what you know, Miss Carmen. How long has stuff like this been going on?" His gut instinct began to drift in the direction of empiric judgement. Carmen may have seen something odd in the refrigerator, but there was any number of reasonable explanation to this. Walking nightmare, sickness, maybe some medication. But first he needed to hear what she had to say.

Carmen now seemed to share his opinion of the matter. She shifted in her seat and turned to look out the office window, a plexiglass opening into the kitchen. “I don’t know, Web, maybe I just imagining things, is all.” She turned back and looked at him. “I been very tired lately, you know. Been sick. What happened in there was probably just my nerves getting the better of me, is all.”

“Well, regardless, I think you should keep on sitting still for a little while,” Webster said. “What if you tell me what else you’ve seen? Maybe talking it through with me will put a rest to it. We don’t want that sort of stuff stuck in your brain, or whatever just happened in the freezer is liable to happen again.” The pungency of kitchen odors pricked at his senses, attempting to subsume his attention.

“Maybe,” she nodded. “I suppose you’re right.” She wiped her hands on her apron and folded them in her lap. “I’d say, for me, this whole business began back when I first started working here, back in ’94. Maybe ’93. Or ’92. Can’t remember. Anyway, that’s not so important when I started, but what I learned soon as I came.”

Webster raised his hand. “I’m sorry, Miss Carmen, but I thought you said you only saw this man once before?”

She tightened her eyebrows and frowned. The bags beneath her eyes became like storm clouds, forecasting inevitable precipitation and possible lightning. “Son, when I say I’ve seen him ‘again,’ it don’t mean that I’ve only seen him once before. I never said that. Truth is, I had only seen him once before, not too long ago. But you need to know some important things, parts of this island and this camp, before we get to that.”

Webster nodded in assent. He sat upright and folded his arms.

“So when I come here about ten years ago or so, there was quite a few people work here who were far past the proper age. People who were kept in more for charity than actual work, you follow me? So we have this one woman named Jacksie. She was real elderly, at least 85, by the time I got here, and she stayed on till she was in her 90’s. Jacksie made bread before we got that big old bread maker out there; that’s all she did, make bread all day long. She was a real good baker, she was. Aurelia brought her in every day from Johns Island in Aurelia’s Oldsmobile. Aurelia used to work here too, you wouldn’t know her. I took her job when she retired.”

Carmen was usually terse with just about everyone, but her newfound amplitude of words did nothing to make Webster feel at ease. Instead, it was as if he was witnessing her strip away the mystique of folklore and charm that surrounded camp. He knew he was going to learn things that would unsettle him, and had a strong inclination to plug up his ears. The office was ever darker, its makeshift walls ever closer in.

“So Jacksie was a real old woman by the time I come around here,” she continued, now swiveling her seat back and forth ever so slightly, “and she been around so long she remember when the camp started. In fact, and this is where I’m getting at, Jacksie worked a very long time for the land’s original owner. She was her maid, starting when Jacksie was a young lady and ending when the old woman died.”

“The land’s original owner?” Webster was puzzled. He had known that Seavey Island was originally owned by the Seavey family, but they wouldn’t have been around when Jacksie was a young lady. “Who would that be?”

“Oh, I never forget that.” Carmen’s face was lit up with a smile, giving brief respite from the pressure of her terrified pallor. “Jacksie talk about Miss Mary Rhett Seavey all the time. Proper fine lady she was. And generous, too. Gave the whole island to the church in the thirties.”

Webster nodded, remembering McCormack telling him that the land had been a gift from a wealthy church member back before the war, but the last name troubled him for several reasons. “Miss Carmen, correct me if I’m wrong, but Mary Rhett *Seavey*? Was she a cousin of the family that originally owned this island? I thought all the Seaveys died in the, the...”

He caught himself, hesitant to use the phrase ‘slave revolt’ in front of Carmen. *I mean, he thought, it’s not a big deal now to bring it up, right? We’re all on the same side now. But there’s still a veil that hangs over this place.* He shook the thought and continued, “The battle at the plantation.”

“That’s what plenty people think, but truth is Mary Rhett had escaped from the revolt. She was the youngest daughter of the owner, and just a little girl at the time. Jacksie always told us how she somehow escaped into the swamp and cover herself in plough mud. She then end up with her mother’s family in downtown Charleston and later inherited her father’s land, which she just left alone for a very long time. When she got older, when Jacksie was around, they come to the island and walk around, just so she could ‘member what she could. She couldn’t usually ‘member much ‘cept the fighting and the fire, but when she came to the island she could walk inside her old house, and the fields, and she could ‘member being a little girl again. That’s the way Jacksie told it. I only ‘member it myself because toward the end of her life, that’s all Jacksie talked about. Miss Mary Rhett Seavey. Never married; sad lady she was.” Carmen stopped and looked up at Webster, as if that was the end of what she had to say.

“So, did Jacksie ever see strange things when she was out here?” Webster felt like he was prodding. “Is that where it began for you?”

“I getting to that,” Carmen said. She was visibly agitated now, swiveling her chair back and forth. Webster wondered if everything she remembered had been turned sinister by whatever she had seen in the freezer.

“So Jacksie, she’d tell all us in the kitchen about how funny stuff would happen when she’d visit the old plantation with Miss Seavey. Once, I remember, she said she saw dozens of people working in a cotton field, so she asked Miss Seavey who they were. Miss Seavey only looks in that direction and asks who she talking about, and Jacksie saw there weren’t nobody out there. She also hear men and women yelling and hollering, whether it was for danger she could never tell. I believe she said that once, ‘round dusk, she saw a barn on fire, but by the time she got to it, it looked like it had been burnt down for years.

“I can’t rightly recall what particular word Jacksie used to describe the plantation. Never called it haunted nor nothing; I think she referred to it as ‘living,’ like, although it might be all burnt down and dried up, there was still a heart at the middle of the plantation, beating on hard as ever.”

Webster thought of the living statues he’d seen while in Paris on a school trip, painted mimes who assumed utterly stationary positions for hours on end, only to break form and come to life like Galatea slipping from stone into flesh before Pygmalion’s eyes. He was beginning to understand where Carmen’s panic had come from. He felt it too. The smell of rotten fish and horseradish coming in from the kitchen was making his eyes water. He could swear that the bookshelf and cabinet were growing taller and leaning forward, intent on trapping them in. They

were like the street mimes, he knew now, creatures that had posed as furniture for decades, only to now reveal their true forms and fall upon them.

“Miss Carmen,” he said, abruptly, “would you care to get outside for a second? We can get some fresh air, get away from that smell. You smell that, right?”

She nodded and murmured something about it always smelling like that. They made their way outside and stood in the gravel lot, squinting in the sunlight. A milky haze of dust covered everything like a sheer fabric. Webster tried to remember what specifics McCormack had told him about the slave rebellion. The man had droned on for hours about the subject during the long games of Scrabble they would play early on in his stay here. McCormack had always stressed that he was only stretching out what little he and the rest of the historical community knew about the subject, but this stretching easily became a voluminous cobweb of speculation and myth.

There were, however, distinct specifics. The figure of the slave foreman who led the plantation’s slaves in a mass overthrow of the few whites. The house slave, a young girl, who fled to nearby Johns Island and alerted the Federal troops that were stationed there. The confrontation between slaves and soldiers that turned into a bloodbath. This had all taken place less than three hundred yards away from what was now Camp St. Jude. No wonder Miss Carmen, working so close to and in full knowledge of such horror, had reached this point.

But no, something still wasn’t right. There was more of the story that needed telling, and Carmen was talking.

“Sometimes I’d walk into the kitchen, early in the morning, when it just her and Aurelia who was here, and I hear her talking to someone soft, very soft. I’d walk in and it would just be Jacksie there, Aurelia nowhere to be seen. I’d ask her who she talking with, like to tease her



about talking to herself and all, but she just look straight at me and say, ‘Just talking to an old friend, that’s all,’ and at that point I begin to doubt her being all there up in the head and all.”

Webster looked around at the surrounding pines, their shadowed tops swaying in the breeze. Had it somehow become cloudy in the space of a minute? It had just been so sunny out here. Again, Webster felt the foreboding thrum that lay within Carmen’s voice.

“Web, I think I need a place to sit.” She walked back towards the storm door and grabbed an empty detergent bucket from a bin that collected containers for recycling. She walked over to a place near the dumpster where an oak tree’s shade fell. Webster realized that it definitely still sunny, and that he was sweating. Carmen motioned for Webster to join her, then produced a pack of Kools and a lighter, her hands shaking. “Smoke?” she offered. He declined. She lit the cigarette and took a few deep drags; her trembling ceased. The smell of cheap tobacco and menthol wafted into Webster’s nostrils.

“A couple times-” Carmen paused. She coughed, then repeated herself. “A couple times I gave her a ride into camp when Aurelia couldn’t. One time, this when she near ninety, she start pointing at different places along the road into here and she start talking ‘bout what happened there like she been there. I remember, very clearly, her pointing at the grove of wax myrtles stands right at the bend; you know where I’m talking about?” Webster nodded. “I ‘member her pointing there and saying, ‘This where they shot ‘em, the survivors,’ like she walk right up in there in the middle of the fight and stood there and watched.

“This is the thing you have to understand, though,” Carmen continued, “Jacksie was always a sharp-eye woman, I mean she always spoke very clear and was pretty well educated and kept her wits until she die in her bed one summer the night before camp begin. This being so, it was odd that whenever she talk about the plantation and things she saw or knew that

happened there, she get sort of distant. Like, I'm trying to think of a way to put it..." Carmen had both her hands raised in front of her face as if she was trying to frame the image in her mind. Smoke peeled off the cigarette in her hand. "Like if her voice had glasses that made it all clear, and those glasses got knocked off. So, just like her vision get blurry without her eyeglasses, her voice got all, I don't know, muggy like the middle of a swamp." She took a puff of the cigarette. "Aurelia would say that she was being taken to another place, or that maybe it was someone else saying it through Jacksie. I didn't know what I thought about that. Even after Jacksie died I had no idea whether she saw something I didn't, or whether she was a little touched in her head. That's changed, though. Now I think either she was onto something or else I'm a little touched myself."

As inclined towards rationality as Webster was, he saw, no, felt her point with awful sincerity. Now he felt the trees themselves bending over, reaching down as if to claim him. It was getting harder and harder to concentrate on what Carmen was saying.

"Something happened on Monday night, see, something an awful lot like what just happened just now in that freezer."

"You were here Monday night?" he asked. He looked towards the kitchen; he recalled dinner that night being delayed, the cooks' tempers wearing thin.

"'Gainst my will. Steve has Monday off, you know, and there ain't nobody but Maxine in charge of the kitchen, and Maxine, God bless her, she a fine cook, but she can't handle crisis no how." She threw her hand up into the air in resignation. "Y'see, there's a problem with the grease trap, and they don't know how to fix it, even if James was suppose to learn back when we got it cleaned, and so they call me. So I had to get out of my relaxing clothes and haul my ass over here." She paused, looked up at him. "Pardon my language, Web."

He waved his hand absentmindedly, still twitching his gaze back and forth, trying to make sure nothing crept into his periphery. “Not at all. That sounds dreadful.”

“Believe me, it was. Ain’t no mess like what’s inside a grease trap. Ever seen a fire in a grease trap? I have, a couple times actually, and it’s the worst. Anyway, I’m losing myself. So I get over here round about nine o’ clock, and everybody’s gone. Everybody. Completely dark.”

“They do clear out pretty quick after dinner,” Webster said. He made a mental effort to shove the irrational, ominous worry to the back of his mind. Deep breaths, deep breaths.

“Oh, I know. I did too, back when I worked dinner shifts. So at this point I’m pretty mad off, you know? But by the Lord I wasn’t going to throw a fit like one of these little kids here who get their meatloaf mixed up with their mashed potatoes.” She shook her head. “No, I was going to fix this. I open up the trap only to find that there ain’t nothing wrong with it ‘cept that it’s full, and of course, I gotta be the one to empty it out and dump the bucket in the grease bin back there.” Carmen rolled her eyes and took a final wind of her cigarette.

Webster grimaced. The grease bin was a smaller brown version of the larger dumpster, and it smelt of roadkill and had an affinity for attracting the huge black crows that lived all over the island. He suddenly became aware of how glad he was that he didn’t have Miss Carmen’s job. Surely *she* didn’t face the same existential pangs that he did in her day-to-day interactions with the cinnamon rolls and French fries.

“Then I do what I got to do,” she said, tapping off cigarette ash until she was left with just the butt. “And I’m hauling this bucket full of grease out back, and I’m hearing this noise. Sound like a bird call at first, an owl or a whip-poor-will, so I didn’t think nothing of it at first. I notice it, definitely. Very particular, and it came from the trees like a wave of sound, almost. But still, I didn’t really consider it all too unusual. Wild animals still scare me sometimes, and I grow

up in the middle of po-dunk nowheres. But I finish emptying my bucket, and that's when I noticed how dark it had got. You know much about moon phases and such?"

"Can't say I do. I mostly just enjoy the moon when it's out and don't think about it when it's gone." Webster crouched down and picked up a piece of limestone gravel that had been kicked up into the roots of the oak. He rolled it around in his fingers, feeling the smear of its chalky residue.

"That's alright, you a city boy," she said, flicking the cigarette butt to the ground and stamping it out. "I know all about the moon and cycles; my grandpa taught me all sorts of things like that back in the day. Monday was full moon, and though it should have been up there, hanging just above the trees, it weren't. Weren't even no stars, either. I thought it was clouds, but it clear of clouds, too. Just blackness up there and all around me, nothing but that one orange lamp hanging overhead. Well that got me real nervous, and I mean to start back to the kitchen, and that's when I notice that there's no light on in there, either." Carmen inhaled sharply like she was preparing to blow into a trumpet, but held the breath, held in indecision. She looked at Webster.

"I was out by this here dumpster and everything was dark," she said, her voice lowered. She motioned towards the rusting green hulk. "I couldn't see nothing, but nothing was starting to scare me. I could feel, like, emptiness everywhere, like the trees and buildings and dumpsters weren't there no more, and it was just me and the darkness. I couldn't even smell anything either, no grease or trash or pines. And the noise that I thought was just an owl or nightingale or something started getting louder, and the cicadas and frogs weren't singing no more. Sounded like, you know when you're lying in your bed at night, and you hear a train whistle off in the distance?"

“Yes, I do,” he said. He dropped the piece of gravel and rubbed his hands together.

“Really melancholy.”

“That’s it!” She snapped her fingers and pointed at him. “That’s the word this noise was, just melancholy and dark, coming from everywhere. At that point I don’t know what else I saw or heard, ‘cause I just dropped the grease bucket and start running blind to where I thought my car was. I found it some ways and just opened it up and turned it on, no thinking ‘bout it at all. At some point getting down that old dirt road I notice that the moon was back and I could see things clear. I’s so shook up I went to sleep soon as I got home; just didn’t want to think about what had happened.”

Webster had stopped rolling the rock around in his hand, instead transfixed on Carmen’s face. Her eyes had opened further than he’d ever seen them, and the folds of skin beneath them had completely disappeared. Her face stretched in such a way that she seemed years younger, her skin made taut and shiny with sweat. Webster thought he’d never seen her look more alive. For his part, though, he felt nothing

“What about the man? You did see him, didn’t you?”

“Oh, my Lord, if I only I could forget him.” She took off her hair net and began stroking her head. “He got stuck on my mind so bad I couldn’t go into work the next morning. Thing was, that night I dreamed I was back behind the kitchen, dark and that *noise* all around me, but I couldn’t run. I think I had to take the grease bucket back to the kitchen first, or something like that. But then the darkness around me just sort of came together, if that make sense, in front of me, and it became a man. Everything around us might have been dark too, or it might have been white, I don’t remember, all I remember was him. He was just like the man I seen in the freezer;

black as the darkness, his clothes, his skin, his *eyes*, that was the worst part was his eyes.” She stared at Webster with such strained intensity that he could hardly bare to keep eye contact.

“But this was a dream, so some things kept changing. I can’t remember it too good, but I think his clothes kept turning, like he’d being wearing a nice suit and then he’d being wearing overalls and hat. And then he started speaking to me, and even though I forgot what he said soon as I woke up, what he said was awful sad, so awful I start crying in the dream. I cried for him, but I also cried for me too; I can’t explain it. Then I woke up. Four or five in the morning, and I’m still crying. I couldn’t go back to sleep, so I just sat there in my bed, just crying and crying. Soon I’s all froggy from crying, and so I called Maxine to tell I’s sick. Then I just sit there for a while. Don’t know how long.”

Carmen had returned to her normal self, hunched over glumly like a child in time-out. She turned heavy eyes up towards Webster.

A warmth alighted on the back of his neck. The sun had escaped from behind clouds, he knew. He looked at his watch. They’d been talking for twenty minutes.

*How did that even happen? I barely ever speak to Carmen.*

“Carmen,” he asked, “did you tell anyone else about this?”

“No son, just you. I wanted to straight off at first, but then I start to think about it and thought maybe I’s just going a little crazy. Then I saw him in the freezer. I might still be crazy, though.” She laughed darkly.

“Why me?”

“You an authority figure about this sort of thing.” She withdrew her pack of Kools from her pocket and started to shake one out. She stopped and pushed it back in the carton. “I should think you’d know what to do about, I don’t know, ghosts and like.”

“Oh.”

Webster realized he wasn't feeling the skepticism that so regularly took up residence in the forefront of his brain while he talked about supernatural occurrences with the staff. The reality of whatever this thing was had permeated the air of the camp since that first night when he had scared Maxine half to death in an otherwise abandoned kitchen. Whispers and rumors surrounded the camp when it was spoken about in the upper diocese, most particularly the antebellum past of its surroundings. He realized now that he had believed in some sort of presence here all along, just without a testimony or witness to lay claim to.

This summer and the previous one had held many moments of walking along wooded trails and seeing black whirligigs floating on his periphery, of finding lights turned on in his cottage, of sleep-walking to his screen porch and standing there until he woke up. Of course, all these things were easily traced back to his poor vision, his forgetfulness, and his history of somnambulism. Where Webster found himself caught was in his readiness to accept the existence of ghosts and hauntings, spiritual darkness, and his denial of the reality of teenagers, mere children, prophesying God's word over one another, praying for healing. What a strange reality he believed in, where the existence of pure evil was harder to intellectually pursue, yet the gut-charge of its appearance in night-sweats and the testimony of an older Gullah woman made it unquestionable. Then again, maybe this “evil” wasn't so evil. Maybe it was misunderstood.

Why, then, were his hands trembling and clamped together like vices?

“Why would something like this be happening, Miss Carmen?” he asked. He felt like a little kid in his inability to foresee an answer.

“Truth be told, Web, I could think of a couple reasons, but none of them quite stick like I like them to. Y'see, it's easy just to say there's angry spirits living up in that plantation

house over yonder, or in the grove where Jacksie say they all buried, but I can't understand why they coming and intruding up here, in the camp. It's not like this hall is built on top of their old homes, or their graves.

"I could say maybe they being attracted by something, too. Like I've heard tell what a person does in the here and now will rile up what had happened in the past. But that would have to means something going on at the camp is getting these spirits going, and the only thing changed recently is you coming along, and you ain't even from around here." She motioned towards him with an upwards palms. "You ain't from around here, are you?"

Webster stood up and shook his head. "I don't think so. Both of my parents are from South Carolina a couple generations back, but not from around here." That was the truth.

"Besides," Carmen continued, "if this had anything to do with you, I can hardly see why this thing's been popping up around me, not you." She shook her head. "Damn it. I need a cigarette." The pack of Kools was still clutched tight in her hand. She poked one out and lit it.

The world was still. Carmen shifted on the bucket and it let out a groan. Webster thought he was going to sneeze. The storm door behind him clattered shut. He turned and saw Maxine walking towards them, taking a cigarette out of her own pack of Parliaments.

"How y'all doing?" she asked. She nodded at Carmen. "You alright, honey?"

"Yeah, I'm alright now," Carmen assented. "I just got a fright right there, but I'm coming around."

"So you see a ghost or what?" The question, though a jestful one, was posed with utter seriousness. Webster waited to see how she'd respond.



“What do you think, Maxine?” she said. There was no glare of her eyes or twist of her head to undercut this question with sarcasm or spite. She just smoked her cigarette. Apparently, Carmen’s question was entirely sincere.

Maxine didn’t seem phased by this change in her disposition. “I reckon you seen something real. I been working here five, six years, and I can tell you something ain’t all right around here. I’ve seen a thing or two, late at night, going back to my car. Sometimes just shapes moving like no deer would, sometimes just a feeling.”

“Would you say,” Webster interjected, “that this would be the common experience among most of y’all?”

“What do you mean?” Carmen asked.

“Well, what most of the-” He caught himself an instant before saying ‘black people’.

“What most of the kitchen workers have experienced. You know, working here for a while and all.” *Idiot*. He realized he had been grouping Maxine and Carmen into the amorphous group of mystical black women who spoke with an accent and could, assumedly, see past regular physical borders because it was in their blood. Racial division caused by the tropes of movies and television. *Idiot*. He noticed he was sweating profusely.

“Well,” Maxine said, “I would probably say so, but it not something you really talk about. No one really want to think they job is haunted.”

“Now I know what you getting at, Web,” Miss Carmen said, the usual slick vigor back in her tone. She jabbed her cigarette hand at him. “You thinking that because we grew up ‘round here, in the middle of nowheres and all, that we see haints and golliwogs and the like on a reg’lar basis. Since we island people and all.”

He could not tell if Carmen was mad or just humoring him. He spoke slowly. “No ma’am, not precisely. Now, I realize the,” he paused and put his hands in his pockets. “The Gullah people have a strong cultural heritage and an oral tradition, I mean like story-telling and all, but I don’t think that somehow growing up here makes you special about seeing the supernatural or anything.” Carmen took a drag and cracked a closed smile, blowing out smoke through her nostrils. She wasn’t mad at him. He felt better. “Now, maybe someone who grows up in the suburbs or city doesn’t see paranormal things, assuming they exist, as easily as someone growing up a bit more isolated does, but I don’t think you ladies are seers or anything like that.”

“Oh, alright,” Carmen said. “I was just thinking maybe you was trying to get a little derogatory about this or something. I seen what I seen, and whether I’m crazy or not, I’m most definitely not stupid. Or touched.” She dropped her finished cigarette on the ground.

“Now me, on the other hand...” said Maxine, who paused and then laughed. “Naw, I’m just playing. I’m all there, far as I can tell.”

Webster laughed along, still slightly afraid of offending someone. It was amazing how quickly the atmosphere of the room could change from laughter to tight-lipped faces staring unamused. *Idiot*. He had to watch his words. “Miss Carmen,” he offered, “you want to talk more about this?”

She shook her head. “I feel about right, right now. But maybe we could pray? That’s what Paul say, pray in all things, all times.”

“Sure thing,” Webster said. He looked to Maxine. “Care to join us?”

“Ah naw, I never meant to interrupt.” She threw her cigarette into the gravel and stamped it out. “I gotta still be working right now. You two carry on.”

“Alright.” He turned back to Carmen. He didn’t quite know how to pray about a ghost. After all, the only ghost in the Bible was the ghost of Samuel, and he only showed up to tell King Saul that he was going to die. “Miss Carmen, would you like to pray for us? I mean, I could open us up, and you could pray for this situation. After all, you know it better than I.”

She agreed, then stood and took his hands. Webster began to pray by asking the Holy Spirit to strengthen Carmen and encourage her. He opened his eyes and nodded at her. Carmen bowed her head and broke into song, a medley of tunes picked from various hymns and spirituals, only a handful of which he recognized. He thought he heard the first three bars of ‘Amazing Grace’ at one point. She sang like this,

*Oh Lord, Father God, Lord God of the fire and the whirlwind,  
protect us. Keep us safe from the devil, lion that he is,  
stalking the darkness for your children to eat up and devour.  
Protect us from the powers of darkness, the principalities, the authorities,  
the Prince of the Air. Oh Lord God, Jesus Christ, Holy Ghost, protect us.  
Protect my Brother Web from discouragement, from doubt.  
Would you give him a word, Lord Father?  
Oh Lord God, protect us.*

She sang on for longer than Webster was comfortable with, although, as he admitted to himself, most everything like this made him uncomfortable. After finishing with a whispered ‘Amen,’ she silently matched her eyes to his, nodded, and relinquished her hands from Webster’s. She then turned wordlessly and walked back towards the kitchen. Webster thought of calling out an obligatory ‘Let me know if you need anything,’ but he couldn’t bring himself to it. Instead, he picked up the empty detergent bucket and walked it back to the bin. He decided

against walking back through the kitchen, so he turned to traipse through the gravel lot and down a path towards the beach. As he passed the grease dumpster, he paused and looked to his left, into the dark, wet, slate wall of pine trees that halted the sun's touch and offered implicit testimony to Carmen's account. Nearly indiscernible, several yards back, the shadow of a deer picked carefully along. A dragonfly zipped past his face, startling him and pulling his gaze out of the forest.

The inevitable doubt, held at bay for so long by the power and hauntedness of Carmen's voice, began to seep into Webster's thoughts.

*Alone. At night. Tired. Stressed. Of course she's going to see things, it's the way the mind works: you expect something, then your mind creates it. Total darkness? Just a cloud over the moon. A short in the electrical supply. Happens all the time out here. Dreams? Even more suggestible than sensory experience. Don't be a superstitious doof, dude.*

He knew that he had given Carmen more credence on account of her being an island-dwelling black woman. Surely his old sociology professor would argue that he was pushing his fear of the unknown onto a culturally unfamiliar minority, so that he could-

*Stop it.*

Webster walked back in the direction of his cottage. He needed to pray about this for a while. He shot off a preemptory one, *Please God, let this not be a real thing*, and started to whistle, poorly, the theme song to the *The Muppet Show*.

## Chapter V

The weekend pounded by quickly, a runner sprinting on tightly packed sand. There was a communal staff trip into Charleston that Web joined, partly out of a desire to not be alone at camp after the conversation with Carmen, but mostly out of boredom. Most all of the staff, except for two male counselors who preferred to go fishing, left mid-morning and stayed downtown until the late evening. He made himself a low profile, going to Waterfront Park and reading Thomas á Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* while the others went and shopped on King Street, or walked along shaded sidewalks and admired the ornate mansions and elegant single-houses that populated the neighborhood south of Broad Street. A plastic bottle of Sundrop at his side, he sat on one of the porch swings that lined the park's pier and alternately whiled through the book and stared out over the harbor. The sun rolled its course through a clear sky and soon disappeared into the city behind him, at which point the chaplain wandered off in search of his group. He found them gathered outside a seafood place called A.W. Shucks. There was dinner, with laughs and shouts, flirtations and hints at already-formed romances between half the staff. Caleb and Trish were the most obvious about it, always sitting next to one another, setting themselves off laughing with no more than a word. Even though camp policy stated that the formation of relationships between staff must be held off until the end of the summer, it was inevitable that several, though poorly disguised, would still arise. Webster stayed complacently above it all until he found himself back in his cottage and in his bed.

He remained there until Sunday afternoon, at which point he was roused by the buzzing of his cell phone: Dart summoning him to a leadership meeting that he had forgotten about. On accident. Afternoon lengthened and then darkened into shadow.

It was the part of evening just before the fence of dusk; a great, dark zeppelin of cloud and wind hovered over the camp, denying it the dying sunlight. Webster watched *60 Minutes*; an old man in a wool herringbone jacket complained about something. He turned the television off and looked at the Bible lying on his glass-top coffee table, right next to where his feet lay propped up. Thunder rolled at a distance. Did he hear a bell toll? Thunder again, closer this time. The only light present was the glow of the stove lamp in his kitchen. He got up for something to eat. He looked out of the kitchen window, towards the estuary. A deeply crimson eye peered through a crack in the clouds on the horizon. Dark gray and scarlet colluded and he thought of Edgar Allan Poe and his story about the Red Death.

Cloud closed over the eye. Gray became black. It began to rain.

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The new week, the final session, started the way Sunday had ended: wet. Webster made the resolution to keep his head down for the week as much as he could. He would shorten his talks in chapel, minimize the time he spent with campers, and isolate himself from the staff by taking long drives out of camp, off Seavey Island, and down dirt roads that led to long overgrown homesteads and aluminum fences with the **NO TRESPASSING** signs, the letters luminescent orange against jet black. He made this decision, or so he told himself, because he didn't want to affect the campers with his depressive thoughts. The focus of his mind since Friday had been everywhere except the camp, where he was supposed to be ministering to young hearts, and he knew that the thoughts cycling through his head (of ghosts, of open black mouths, of lies, of sanity) would only be detrimental to his efforts at being a proper chaplain. The staff was more capable at this than he was. He had never seen anyone talk a kid out of homesickness like Hannah, one of the first year staff. No one spoke of the campers more highly than Lorna.

Weston, a veteran counselor, could get a camper laughing within thirty seconds with one good fart joke. It would be best if he took a back seat to their work loving the children.

The dreams, too. The past three nights Webster had dreamt strange dreams, and he wasn't usually a dreamer. He was used to falling asleep into an empty space and waking back up out of one. Sure, he *had* dreams, he knew. Everyone dreams, but not everyone remembers. Now his dreams, or his singular dream, his waking dream, placed him in the middle of a dark expanse, perhaps a meadow or the parking lot of a Super Wal-Mart, and let him wander around in an utter absence of light. He would wander for what seemed hours, and every time he had the growing sensation of something approaching him. Something hung onto his periphery, except nothing did, because nothing could, because everything was black. He was being watched, maybe hunted, only nothing came at him until the end of the dream, when he felt the presence of a breath or a hand or a claw on his shoulder and he turned around, and he knew.

But he woke up then. Each time he woke up and would not fall back to sleep.

On Monday morning, he sat in the dining hall, surrounded by the noise of campers eating, and stirred a cup of Satan's Piss coffee that he wouldn't be drinking. He looked at Dart, sitting across the table and performing the chore of coaxing food into his daughter's mouth. This man was his upper, his authority in every way except that Webster had a fading, cursory knowledge of Greek and Dart didn't. He should talk to Dart about this and receive his thoughts, his counseling. Of course, he couldn't directly bring up Miss Carmen's story. That wouldn't be right, airing all that out in front of the camp director like that. She had told him that story in confidence.

Webster barely touched his food. Breakfast finished and he took his plate to the dish-washing window, which was right next to the entrance to the kitchen. Inside, James was collecting plates and dousing them down with a faucet-hose.

“G’ morning James,” Webster said, “Miss Carmen here?”

James looked up at him. “Yeah, she back in the office.”

Webster nodded and turned away wordlessly. He didn’t much feel like talking to Carmen again, even to make sure that Friday morning had actually happened. The herd of Dart stood by the doorway out of the dining hall, coffee cup in one hand, his daughter’s hand in the other. Webster rubbed sleep out of his eyes as he approached them.

“G’ morning, Dart. G’ morning Amelia.”

“Good morning Web!” Dart bounced back his greeting. “Can you tell Father Web ‘Good morning,’ Amelia?”

The one year-old chose to look intently to where her mother was cleaning off Gus’s face with a wetted napkin.

“It’s alright,” Webster offered, “I’m not much of a morning person either.”

“Truth,” Dart said. “Who is, anyway?”

“I thought you were.”

Dart laughed. “Nope. I fake it. For everyone’s sake. You have to have at least one obnoxiously happy person in the morning, else no one can bring themselves to get anything done before eleven o’ clock. Youth ministry will teach you that real quick.” He patted Amelia’s head. She had buried her face in his leg, now peeping back at Webster in split-second intervals.



He smiled. It seemed that any insincerity he had attributed to Dart wasn't entirely inaccurate, even if the reasoning was perfectly sound. He recalled what he came to talk to Dart about.

“Hey, actually, I was wondering if camp has any records of its history? I'm figuring that I need to prepare myself for the fall as one of the hosts of this fine facility.”

Dart again laughed his clipped, explosive squawk. “You mean you didn't learn all you ever wanted to know about this place from McCormack? I don't think I ever had a conversation with the man shorter than twenty minutes. If he caught me, he considered me a willing listener to hear his opinion on diocesan history, or Bill Clinton, or Mayor Riley, or whatever history book he had just finished.”

Webster remembered the first time he had met McCormack at a fundraising gala for Camp St. Jude. The man was in his late 60's and already demonstrated a potent *contemptus mundi*, hatred of the world, that was generally reserved for those on the far side of 75. McCormack had held him captive for at least thirty minutes to listen to an extended monologue on American foreign policy, and how a nuke in Damascus would clear up the whole Middle East problem right quick. His long-winded disposition had dispersed, however, when he came out to live at camp last August. At first he had continued his tradition of narrating long stretches of time to him in single-sittings, either at meals or when Webster stopped by his office, yet as time went on he became increasingly scatter-brained and harried. By late fall it was impossible for Webster to hold his attention for any longer than a minute. It only got worse from there; sightings of him became few and far between. Most conversations were aimless and consisted of the elderly lawyer asking Webster about people he had never heard of, or places he had never been. The thought of mental instability had crossed his mind once or twice, but he had considered the man

an oddball in the first place. When he left in the middle of February, the chaplain had never thought to follow up with him. He felt a twinge of regret now, like he had been a bad spiritual counselor to a man who had never requested his counsel.

He looked Dart in the eyes. “McCormack told me plenty about the camp’s history, but my memory has always been shot. He had to have left some sort of write-up on Seavey’s history, right?”

“Yeah.” Dart turned his head to look out the doorway and sip his coffee. Amelia was now dangling from his left hand, having let her legs go limp, and was trying to get him to swing her back and forth. When he looked back at Webster, the chaplain thought he saw a hint of red embarrassment around his cheeks.

“Truth be told, Web, I haven’t really gone through the records in the office. I assumed that McCormack would have organized everything there, and yeah, I thought he probably would have left some sort of document that summed up everything he found. But, honestly, I’ve just been too taken up with work to go look.”

Dart looked down at Amelia, still hanging from his hand. “I’m gonna need you to stand all the way up, honey. I’m talking to Father Web right now.” She reluctantly stood back on her feet.

Webster nodded. “That’s completely fine. Really. That’s probably my job, seeing as I was supposed to assume his duties when he left.” He paused. There was something else he needed to ask. He snapped his fingers. “Oh! The key. McCormack’s office in the back of the building is still locked. You would have the key?”

“Yeah,” Dart dropped his daughter’s hand and fumbled around for his key ring, attached to a belt loop on his right hip via a carabiner. He gave the key ring to Webster.

“Get it off if you can. It’s the goldish one there, I think. Green rubber top.”

He found it immediately, a bronze key with a faded green covering over the key’s body. The word “**OFFICE**” was etched on in Sharpie. He pried the ring open and wiggled the key off of it. It lay in his hand like a tiny dead fish, its shine overtaken by a cold pallor.

“That should open it for you,” Dart said as he took back the key ring. “I keep my office unlocked, so I won’t need it for a while. If you have any problems, ask me.”

“Thanks. See you later, Amelia.” The toddler smiled and mashed her face back into her father’s leg. Webster left the dining hall and headed straight towards the office. It wasn’t until he was at the office’s front door that he realized that he needed to lead and preach at the morning chapel. He stared through the glass door into the darkened office. Rain plashed on his parka.

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On Tuesday, after lunch, he found himself free to get into the records. The morning had been clear enough to do outdoor activities, but now the rain had closed in again. The post-lunch period acted as a siesta for campers and counselors alike, naptime followed by a Bible study, conducted with varying degrees of success with different age groups. Regardless, the siesta period would stretch long into the afternoon, likely taking the form of a movie in the chapel or circle games in the dining hall. He usually took campers sailing during the activity periods, but with rain on the way he had no obligations for this afternoon.

He left the dining hall and headed towards the office, but was soon flagged down by Lorna. He felt simultaneous rises of pleasure and annoyance; he always wanted to talk to her, pretty young lady that she was, but at the same time he really wanted to get in those files and find...what, anyway?

“Hey, Father Web, guess who’s gonna be your neighbor for the next nine months?” she asked, a huge smile sweeping across her face.

“Haven’t the slightest idea,” he said, his face set stiffly before he also broke into a smile. “Who could it be?”

Just like that, he was immensely more glad to be talking to her than being in the office.

“Yours truly, buddy! How about that?”

“Well, by the end of this we’re either going to hate one another’s guts or be married, so I suppose...” He trailed off. Really, married? His mind groaned.

“You suppose what?” Lorna asked, still smiling. It lifted her right cheek higher than her left, and granted her face a peculiarly asymmetrical beauty. How utterly unflappable she was to his awkward jibes.

“I suppose this’ll be fun. You’ll make a better campmate than McCormack. You ever meet him?” His mind shot to the office files.

“No, never did,” she said. She shifted the straps of the backpack she carried, faded red with her initials monogrammed on the back pocket. “You’ve talked about him a couple times, though. Strange guy?”

“Yeah,” he said. “More than a little bit.” He had run out of things to say. Silence quickly turned into abject terror for him. He rubbed his fingers together, scrambling for something to say.

“How, uh, how are you spending your afternoon?” he asked. “All rain and such?”

“I’m on trash duty, which actually brings me to a question.” She raised a finger at him. “Caleb was going to be my partner, but he’s running the projector for the movie in the chapel. Would you care to join me?”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, no, sorry, I don’t want to impose, I’m sure you have stuff to do. Lesson to prepare.”

“Not at all, actually,” he said. “I’d love to do trash duty with you. I haven’t done it since May, probably. I need to get back in the swing of things.”

The thought of the files had left his mind entirely.

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Wednesday morning. Rain again. Peter Albers found him and asked if he could check through the grounds and make a list of things that needed tending after summer camp was over. The request was given, Webster knew, with the understanding that major problems, like the hole in the rec hall’s floor, the chapel’s sinking roof, and his broken refrigerator, didn’t qualify as things that needed tending. The catalog he would compile instead consisted of burnt-out lightbulbs and cracked PVC piping. Albers’ mustache twitched and he snorted back a clot of phlegm as he handed Webster a damp clipboard with an attached sheet of rain-blotted paper that listed the different buildings at St. Jude’s.

“I don’t expect you to get this done before lunch. Just get it in to me by the end of the day.” Albers scratched at his temple, right beneath the band of his ratty, sweat-soaked Clemson baseball hat, and hitched his loose fitting dungarees back up over his hips. He was so skinny that the waistband caught on his protruding pelvic bones and stayed there.

“Sure thing, Albers’,” Webster said hesitantly. “Are you going to be around? If I have any questions?”

Albers squinted at him, as if struggling to see through the thick and heavily scratched lenses of his glasses, a military issue pair probably older than Webster. He picked at his nose with a pinky finger permanently blackened by engine grease.

“No. No I’m not.” He stopped there, as if to say that he didn’t owe him any explanation. The man’s dislike of him was consistently palpable, although Webster still didn’t fully understand why it was so strong. There had certainly been disagreements of theology, but it had to be deeper than whatever doctrinal differences the two divided on. *No, actually, that’s enough*, his more cynical parts interjected. *It was enough to burn men at stakes*. It was enough now to make Peter Albers disdain him.

“You got any questions,” he said, “you just direct ‘em to Dart. He knows the place well enough. Not well enough as me, but certainly better than you.” He shrugged and glanced side-to-side. “Alright, I’m off now.”

Webster nodded and grunted an affirmative in response to him. Albers turned around, hesitated, and looked back at the chaplain.

“By the way, I talked to the bishop: to cut down on costs we’re using you as free labor for some refurbishing projects we got coming up.” He grinned and pointed at him. “You and me, boy, hammering and nailing. It’ll be a good time.” He walked away without allowing the chaplain a chance to respond.

The hope Webster had built up, hope centered around an impending season of rest with Lorna, collapsed into a wet heap, resignation to hours of being lectured on the Holy Spirit, the *novus ordo seclorum* that was the United Nations, and the impending end of the world. The madness that leapt about in Albers’ brain like a stung billygoat had lead to this, a determination

to awake the liberal chaplain from his hell-bound stupor and convert him to the proper, *true* Christian way.

Clipboard in hand and growing more wet by the moment, he moped down the boardwalk toward the Arts and Crafts building, lovingly dubbed “Farts and Craps” by the male counselors. He glanced at the sheet. The ink had bled across the page and had become illegible. He needed to go to the office and get another clipboard and another one of the building list sheets. And a pen.

The office. With the records.

Yes, he decided, he would flip through the records while he was there, looking up the history compiled by the venerable McCormack. He almost expected to find stories of ghosts, albeit ones that McCormack’s mind had invented entirely from scratch, the kind of ghosts that are never seen, never heard, but gain such dominion over a man that they drive him out of the camp in the middle of February, without so much as a mention to anyone. Perhaps, he thought, he should pay a visit to the man next time he went downtown.

He turned back around toward the direction he came from, the dining hall, and, tucking the clipboard beneath his arm, drew his parka hood tighter around his head. The sky had descended, dropping clouds as close as possible to the earth’s surface, kissing it with a drizzling rain. The sand surrounding the boardwalk was compacted and dimpled, darkened several shades by the falling water yet unable to properly use it. Instead of looking revitalized, the scraps of bristly scrub that grew out of the sand clung closer to the ground, disparate patches of weedy grass splayed out like rotting starfish. The sea oats that rose up from the dune on his left side, however, swayed triumphantly in the breeze, as if to cry out their small resistance to the mild assault of wind and rain. Webster could see the estuary waters from here, gray and roiling like the clouds above them, punctuated by whitecaps which gnashed like teeth.

He was suddenly struck with a sense of gratitude that he was here, on semi-solid land, and not sailing out on the water, trying to keep his sail in check against the wind. What constituted a light breeze on land equated into a maelstrom out on the water. No, he preferred the soggy ground, the trees that punched through indicators of its solidity, its immoveability: the taller a pine went, the deeper its roots took hold, anchored in the dirty deep. The darkness of the forest, the swamp in the shadows of dusk, was far better than the constant murkiness that lay immediately beneath the surface of the estuary. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Webster hurried his pace so as to get out of the open as quickly as possible.

The dining hall and the adjoining office were overshadowed by a canopy of tree branches tangled together by creepers and ivy so thick that the drizzle was turned into a consistent dripping. He walked into the darkened office and immediately turned on the desk lamp that rested on the counter, which stuck out from the left-side wall like an “L,” separating the office lobby from the doorway which led back into a hallway of office spaces. The office had been built contemporaneously with a conference center in the late eighties, and was meant to adjoin the center and the camp as a main base. Hurricane Hugo had wiped out the conference center in 1989, yet had left the camp facilities relatively unscathed. When he had asked Albers about this, he had muttered something about dune coverage and the shape of the shore, trying his best to as though he knew what he was talking about. Regardless, the office, meant to house quite a few administrative workers, had remained and languished. Dart used it, sometimes. Mainly for its crappy dial-up internet. The rest of the rooms were used for storage.

Webster opened the door into the hallway and stepped in. He felt for a light-switch, but there was none. The hallway took a sharp right-hand turn only two steps in, so with a slight hesitation he rounded the corner, keeping his hand on the wall, feeling for a switch. The ceiling



appeared to have no overhead lighting. He surmised it was probably a cost-cutting measure. The only light, besides the glow of the desk lamp from the doorway behind him, was that which sifted through the tall, narrow panes of glass in the doors that lined the hall on his left-hand side. These offices had windows to the outside, but the already feeble light coming in was weakened considerably by its passage through the dark rooms and into the gloomy hallway.

Another right-hand turn two doors down. He had been in the office only a handful of times before, mainly to use the landline in the lobby, but he couldn't specifically recall walking down this hallway. He knew that the records were held in the office at the end, the office that would have been used by the head of St. Jude Camp & Conference Center, had such a facility come to fruition. He turned the corner. Pitch dark. No light filtered through any door-window here. He stopped, letting his eyes adjust. A faint, lavender glow in the rectangular shape of a door-window slowly appeared three feet before him. Webster felt for the key, which he had forgotten about, found it in the unplumbed depths of his left pants pocket, and silently thanked the Lord that he hadn't changed his shorts for three days.

A couple seconds of probing for the key slot ended in a *shunk*, turn, and *click*. Webster pushed the door open, yet was unprepared for the groaning the turning door produced, a sound like the dry grinding of air escaping from the back of a closed throat. The door, fully opened, stopped. The sound did not. It continued for several seconds, and it suddenly occurred to Webster, in a singular, horrible thought, that the sound was, indeed, a constricted, throaty groan.

Webster turned around to face the hallway, now flush with the dim lavender glow. The noise stopped. Dust motes spun in the empty space. He felt a shadow, huge and unknowable, lurking right past the corner. He could not tell where, in the purplish shade, the wall ended and the open hallway began. All was fuzzy; all was royal and numinous.

Webster turned back and walked through the doorway, snapping his fingers, coughing, trying to jolt himself out of the drowsiness which had set upon him. The office was spacious, lined with book shelves on three of its four walls. The fourth wall, to Webster's left, was lined with three large windows that nearly stretched from floor to ceiling. Each window was covered in venetian blinds, the light through them the source of the lavender glow. Office Depot filing boxes made of cardboard were stacked on the floor with a meticulous efficiency of space. He estimated there were probably thirty to forty boxes, tucked so neatly into their formation that he felt a deep sense of regret he would have to uproot them and, one by one, rifle through their contents. A thick layer of dust covered the entire spread of surfaces, thickest on the shelves, lightest on the desk.

The desk against the wall to his left was a magnificent piece of work. He tried to describe it to himself, but the only word that came to his mind was "presidential." Deep, red cherry he was sure had acted as the platform of much great writing, and book-keeping, and whatever else people who sat at such desks did. The legs were carved like Ionic pillars, planted stolidly in the floor to support the broad expanse of the desk surface, where lay several binders and paper folders full of what he could only assume were notes. The desk was surmounted by a superstructure of cubbies and drawers, the latter of which he knew, just *knew*, had to be locked, deep secrets shut up inside.

Webster walked up to the windows and turned the plastic rods so that the blinds let light in. The office illuminated was far less creepy than the open maw he had originally walked into. Even that odd groaning he'd heard was of less consequence now, although it still prodded, dully, at the part of his brain tuned to the experience Carmen had alerted him to nearly five days ago. *It was an echo*, he thought. *It's an old building.*

Not that old.

*Disused, then*, he countered to the prodding.

McCormack used it.

“Then it was probably just his craziness come back to get on my freaking nerves,” he muttered, turning back to the desk. He pulled out the modern rolling chair parked at the desk and sat down.

He drew a binder to him. Blue, cracked vinyl, a patina of dust. He opened it. The first page appeared to be a poorly done photocopy from a book called “Southeastern Landscapes and Ecologies: An Overview.” The page number was illegible, but he saw that he was in Chapter VII, titled “Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia.” He read what he could, and what he gathered was the history of the lowcountry cougar, once the noble king of these woods, now overthrown and reduced to a mere flit and rumor. Webster turned the page. Another photocopy, apparently the next page of the same book. He flipped through the rest of the binder. All photocopies of varying qualities, taken from books on coastal environments and wildlife. One section appeared to be from a book entirely about the strain of albino squirrels that lived on Johns Island. Highlights and pen markings appeared erratically among the sheets, scrawled in the same hand, which he recognized as McCormack’s.

It struck him as unusual that McCormack, whose main concern was history, particularly history from a Southern Confederate standpoint, should be so taken with the nature of Seavey Island, enough to apparently spend hours leafing through books on it. There were even tidal charts in the back pocket of the binder. Webster closed the binder and pushed it away. He drew another one to himself, this one deep burgundy. A chisel-tipped Sharpie had been used to write “**CULTURE**” on the front. He opened it to find a page photocopied from a book on basket-

weaving inside. Webster kept on turning through pages until he came to a page that was clearly not a photocopy, but instead a printed sheet of paper, probably typed up on Microsoft Word. It looked like a script, but he understood that it was, in fact, an interview done only last year.

Scanning the page, he gathered it was a dialogue between McCormack, designated as “McCmk,” and a woman named Cloris Manigault. The questions started with basics: How old are you? Where were you born? Where do you live? How big is your family? This Cloris, he read, was the granddaughter of slaves, herself the matriarch of a subsequent three generations of family, with a fourth generation soon around the bend. Born in 1908 in a tin-roof shack on Johns Island. One of seven brothers and sisters. Already an older woman by the time Dr. King marched, by the time her race received its civil dues as citizens of a free nation. Webster flipped along. The interview went on for several dozen pages, finally ending, he saw, when Mrs. Manigault apparently began to nod off, the time marked as 4:33 PM. He smiled, then wondered why McCormack had sought her out for interview, done so, and typed out a full seventy-something pages of transcript. What did one woman’s story have to do with McCormack’s examination of Seavey’s history?

Webster turned the page, only to find another interview, this one conducted with a Richard Philson, stated in the heading to be a thirty-seven year old African-American native of James Island and mechanic at Bryson’s Auto Body Shop. Webster knew the shop, having taken his car there for mechanical troubles after finding out the hard way that Albers wouldn’t dole out help, at least not to him. He thumbed through the pages, finding this interview to be of a similar length as the last one. They all dated from a year ago, when McCormack had first started to live at St. Jude’s. Examining the thickness of what paper remained, he estimated that at least three or four more interviews lay within. He noticed that the consistency of the paper was thinner toward

the back of the binder, and opening to a random page there he saw that the last couple interviews had been typed out on a typewriter, not a word processor. He found the first type-written page, and though aged and water-damaged, he saw a clear date, July 26th, 1974, and an obvious subject, Jacquelyn Roselia Hamilton. Webster glanced at the first few lines.

*McCmk: Please state your name for the recording equipment.*

*JRH: My Christian name or just what I go by?*

*McCmk: Your full name, please.*

*JRH: Oh, well, I suppose my full name is Jaquelyn Roselia Hamilton, but I ain't gone by that in a long time. Most folks just call me Jacksie.*

Jacksie. Miss Carmen's old coworker. If his understanding of what Carmen told him was correct, she was the closest living link to the Seavey family at the time. This gave McCormack plenty of reason to interview her. Webster decided that he'd found some new reading material for the next couple weeks. He glanced at his watch: 9:28. He needed to get what he came here for, the clipboard and paper. Webster closed the binder and swiveled around in the desk chair.

"What about the boxes?" he wondered aloud. They sat, square and complacent, like tiny office buildings due for demolition, not hidden chests filled with the treasure of knowledge. He lifted the lid of one of them with his foot and glimpsed machinery within, then scooted toward it and took the entire lid off. Inside lay the recording equipment one would see in Cold War-era espionage films: black plastic buttons, mint-green casing, and comically large spools of tape encased in plastic bags labeled with black marker. Audio recordings of the interviews, or at least the older ones. Surely, he thought, McCormack hadn't been so backward as to use this stuff for interviews conducted only last year. He peeked into a several more boxes before he found a shoebox that contained a far more modestly sized recorder, a handheld probably bought from

RadioShack. Tiny cassette tapes in individually marked cases clattered around the recorder. Placing all the box tops back on their respective boxes, he decided he would leave them be for now, consulting them only when some issue of doubt arrived in the reading.

Webster picked the binder up off the desk, readjusted the blinds back to closed, left the room, and locked it back up. He operated quickly as the darkness returned him to obscured sight, working from muscle memory and multiplying numbers in his head to prevent thoughts about the sound from earlier. He went into Dart's unlocked office and quickly found a replacement clipboard, paper, and pen, along with a large Ziploc bag, which he emptied of beads, for waterproofing.

After tucking both binder and Ziploc beneath his parka, Webster jogged back to his cottage. The rain had picked up, and now the dripping from the clustered canopy had become a steady pitter-patter. Out in the open the rain fell in a deluge; he nearly slipped several times on the slickened boardwalk. But the binder stayed dry beneath his jacket, and he delivered it to his bedside table before heading back out into the rain to perform the maintenance check-ups.

## Chapter VI

On Thursday the sun came out and, very briefly, Webster forgot about the dreariness of the past week. During this morning activities he took campers sailing in the estuary, which the past night had primed for activity. The sun turned the water's hue from a dirty green to a reflection of the sky above, which was all a rich blue except for the wisps of cloud which streaked across it like half-erased chalk marks. The wind whipped up the water into a slight chop, thousands of liquid hands and feet pushing up, kicking at the sky. It was like the river longed to be joined again to the sky, blue to blue. The view out toward the ocean was clear and endless, impeded only by the white spittle of waves breaking over sand bars. Looking back down the river, one could see the ruins of the wharf that had once extended out into the river. Brick pilings and nearly-petrified timber struts were all that remained, yet even the survival of these structural fragments was regarded as remarkable.

Every so often, when Webster was feeling adventurous and the wind was in his favor, he would sail down to the wharf, only grasping its true size when he whipped his Sunfish through the arches of brick with no problem. For a split-second he would be shielded from the sun's glare by the barnacle-crusting brick, and in this instant he would grasp the enormity of the operation that the Hadden-Seavey plantation must have been. Surely tons upon tons of precious cargo, rice and indigo particularly, would have been wheeled across the wharf above him. The seabreeze, barreling through arch with him, would touch his skin with an uncomfortable chill, and then he would burst out, sail full with wind, onto the other side and the sunlight there.

For twenty minutes at a time he would sail with a pair of campers and try to make conversation with them. This usually proved difficult, as the kids, particularly the younger ones, tended to be preoccupied with making sure that the boat, a small piece of plexiglass called a Sunfish, didn't flip over. Before any conversation could be made, he had to first reassure them that, of course, he had full control of the boat and that it wouldn't *just* flip over. There were more times than he would care to admit that he had been forced to eat these words, and a sudden swell or caught line *had* flipped the boat over, dumping captain and crew alike into the murky water. In Webster's experience, this more than anything got the campers talking, and although his pride as a sailor would be hurt, a capsizing proved very conducive to his work as chaplain.

This particular morning was a capsizing sort of morning. The weather was perfect, a steady breeze flowing in from the northeast. He, however, found that when he tacked or jibed to turn his vessel, his sheet line, which ran along the sail's bottom pole, the boom, would catch on his life jacket. As a result the sail would fail to give way to the wind, and the Sunfish would tilt until it came all the way over, resulting in a bellied-up boat and laughing campers. It wasn't until he was back ashore that he realized his boom ran parallel to the deck of the boat rather than



tilting up. This caused his sheet line to hang far lower than normal and, as a result, catch on his life jacket.

Webster had his boat back ashore and mounted on the trailer. The kids had raced off to lunch, accompanied by one or two hapless counselors trying valiantly to perform crowd control. He was breaking down the sail when Lorna came up from behind and punched the back of his life jacket.

“I saw you take a couple spills out there, Father Web.” She laughed, her eyes sparkling behind oversized sunglasses. “You losing your touch?”

He turned to her and smiled, his hands rapidly coiling up sailing line.

“Figured it couldn’t hurt,” he shrugged, “giving these kids a little adventure before they’re done out here. Besides, it’s nearly the last time before *we’re* done sailing for the summer.”

“Is it, though?” she said, placing her hands on her hips. “You mean you have no intention of going sailing after summer’s over?”

Webster was sure that beneath her sunglasses she was furrowing her brow in mock sternness. He turned back to the boat, threw the coiled rope inside, and started walking towards the wooden shed where they stored the sailboats.

“Well, it depends,” he said. “Will *you* be sailing?” He grabbed his t-shirt from a hook on the shed wall and slipped on his flip-flops.

She laughed. “If you’re out there capsizing every other minute like you just were, I suppose I’ll *have* to be. Someone’s got to save the chaplain from washing out to sea.”

They walked down the boardwalk back into camp. They came to a foot fountain and began to wash their feet clean of sand. Webster decided he was dry enough to put his shirt back on.

“Ah, that wasn’t really my fault,” Webster waved his hand in her direction. “It was the boom. It hung too low, or something, so the sheet kept catching my life jacket and getting stuck. A mechanical failure; it only *looked* like the sea was kicking my ass.” His hand flew to his mouth. “Whoops, I mean butt. Butt, butt, butt.”

“Father Web,” Lorna said, smiling widely, “if you were a real priest, I might actually judge you for saying that, but you’re a fake one, so I can’t really hold you accountable.”

“I am too a real priest!” Webster said in feigned indignance. He splashed water from the foot fountain onto her. “See, I’m for real baptizing you right now!”

“You can’t do that, I’ve already been sprinkled as an infant *and* dunked as a teenager!”

They both laughed.

As they walked to the dining hall, Webster debated telling her about the happenings over the past week, at least in cursory details. A cloud suddenly blocked out the sun and a brief coolness swept over him, accompanied by a strange sense of heaviness. He felt that whatever darkness, whatever weirdness came out of Miss Carmen’s vision, or McCormack’s interviews, or his own dreams, would end up involving her. It was inevitable, her living in close proximity to him, and even though he had no idea what he expected to come out of the bizarre shadowing-boxing match his mind had been engaged in. She could end up freaking out and ditching just like McCormack. He told himself to calm down, that was the absolute worst case scenario. He was assuming that there really was something to be afraid of.

*Maybe there is, he felt another voice inside himself say. Maybe it's you. The only monsters are flesh and blood and God's breath, after all.*

The evening activity, wedged in the space between dinner and chapel, was a monumental game of capture-the-flag. The rain of the past few days had turned the recreation field into a swamp, and while the sunny day had done its best to dry the soil, the result was still muddy and slippery. Webster, his mood raised considerably by the bright weather and affable company of the day, decided to join in on one final camp activity before the summer.

The field was several acres worth of open, level plain that had been cut into the forest a little over a decade ago to serve as a parking lot for the doomed conference center, then in the preliminary stages of construction. After Hurricane Hugo decimated the conference center, the field was appropriated to serve a dual role as a parking lot for incoming and outgoing parents' cars, and as host to the camp's evening activities. This latter detail had become the case especially after the recreation hall's floor began to weaken and rot through.

Light shirts and dark shirts. The teams were divided by top and bottom bunk, each wearing a different shade of top. Counselors filled out the difference, playing with a light touch, yet most importantly tending to bruised knees and knocked heads, which happened more often than they would like parents to know. Webster had found himself wearing a ratty off-white polo, the left breast inscribed with 'Ben Lippen Swimming,' a reminder of his long-off high school activities. As such, he sided with the light shirts, stripping out his boat shoes and running, skidding, sliding in the huge rabble of kids. Surrounded by a screaming rabble of elementary school kids, he found himself utterly freed of all cloudy worries and thought, the kick and push of heel and toe through mud and weedy grass becoming his entire range of thought. The tall trees

that bordered three of the field's sides did not seem so imposing anymore, even with dusk approaching. Instead, the western wall of foliage lit up with the lowering sun's gleam, and the haze of the golden hour bathed the field.

A smile formed unconsciously and stuck on Webster's face like so much splattered earth. He ducked and wove, turned and dodged with as much agility a fully-grown man could achieve in a huge group of eight-through-ten year olds.

A dark-shirted kid with straight, blond hair, the kind of hair that signified that, yes, he was *all* that, ran toward the boundary line with the flag. Webster's flag. He lunged toward the kid, filled with the exhilaration of the chase, of playground games, and tagged him in one fell swoop. The defeated camper groaned with an audible "Aw, crap," flicked his hair out of his eyes, threw the flag down on the ground, and staggered off to the makeshift 'jail' for tagged players, a borderless area beneath one of the two light poles on either side of the field. One of the male counselors, Weston, himself dressed in a white undershirt streaked with grass stains, ran past Webster and laughed.

"Way to let them play, Web!"

Webster returned the laugh and kept on grinning. "Sorry," he said, panting. "It's just so easy to get excited about this sort of thing, you know."

Weston picked up the muddied flag, a faded rope of red bandanas, and walked back to the flag zone, a wreath of foam pool noodles that, in game logic, acted as a neutral zone within which players of the opposite team could take refuge and plot escapes back to their own side, flag in tow. The counselor turned his long, thin neck and looked back at Webster.

"By the way," he said, smiling, "don't you have a chapel to lead, Mr. Chaplain?"

Webster wiped grime off of his watch and looked at the time. He had spent a good forty-five minutes trouncing about in the mud, leaving him precious little time to prepare for chapel. He didn't care; he literally felt carefree, without worry, which was a category of emotion that rarely showed its toothy smile near Webster's mind. With relaxed motion he jogged off the field, apologizing to white-shirted campers moaning that Father Web couldn't leave them now, picked up his boat shoes, and headed back toward the cottage.

He was so covered in mud that he had to first strip down to his boxer shorts and, as discreetly as possible, rinse himself off at the outdoor shower mounted to the side of the boardwalk several yards away from the front of his home. Once he was done outside, he went inside and took a real shower, scrubbing his hair vigorously and watching shreds of brown grass fall and collect near the drain. He hadn't been this dirty since he last went to the camp's mud pit, situated at the edge of the tidal marsh which the island merged with further down the beach, past the old jetty and the overgrown roadway into the plantation. This hadn't happened since last summer.

As he scrubbed, he thought of the message he would give at chapel. He had, for the previous evenings, invested little meditation into his preaching, a repeat of the same moral lesson about joy. It was the same story of the cheating roommate, the wrongly accused narrator, the impending condemnation for another man's crimes. But, as usual, it lacked the entire truth of the matter, that he had in fact known his roommate was plagiarizing from him, that he didn't try to right the situation because he was too afraid of his roommate's backlash or, more likely, he just didn't care enough.

Webster hummed the bass line to “Billie Jean” as he continued to pick through his scalp for remnants of earth. His hair was feeling thinner by the day, but he had resigned himself to losing his hair when, at the age of seventeen, his forehead became noticeably taller.

*What if, he thought, I told the truth? The whole story?* Ah, it could be neat, add a real *twist* to the whole summer. It would make his teacher’s vouching for his innocence unfounded, undeserved, and absurd. Then again, that seemed to be the whole point of Christianity: undeserved grace and mercy. Was it really? He stopped humming and sighed, letting his hands hang by his sides, so that the warm water cascaded unimpeded over his head and down his face. He couldn’t change his story now, not when he had been telling the same one all summer. He couldn’t do it without the counselors, Lorna, and Dart all noticing, asking questions. It would change the entire scope of the story’s meaning and tinge the summer with the off-putting flavor of a chaplain that consistently fibbed to serve his own purposes. Of course, he thought, he was overblowing it.

His mind remained in the tension of the two choices before him. Why did the option even present itself before him? Why now, the last evening of the final session of camp? He twisted the knob so that the water ceased to flow and grabbed his towel from the rack. Drying off, he pushed the dilemma away from himself. He would cross that proverbial bridge when he came to it.

Webster opened his bathroom door and passed through the living room into his bedroom. He hadn’t turned any lights on, and he could tell the lateness of the hour by the cottage’s inner dimness. After dressing hurriedly, he grabbed his journal and Bible, slipped on his boat shoes, and headed out onto the boardwalk. The sky, which had dangled so close in the previous days of clouds and rain, now opened up into an infinite navy blue, deepening to a sheer black directly overhead. A few bands of light held onto the river-bound horizon, yet otherwise the clear sky

yielded nothing but the darkling twinkle of stars, one by one pushing themselves into definition against the earth's atmosphere. The ocean wind had begun to pick up, tossing unseen waves in closer and closer to the dunes as the tide reached its pinnacle. Webster found himself looking out towards to the water, picking out pricks of light from boats and broadcasting towers located on other sea islands. It was as he looked that he heard the unmistakable rustle and thud of deer moving through the dunes; he turned his sight upon that which he knew he wouldn't be able to see. But he did see something.

A silhouette stood among the dunes, somehow much darker than the indigo hue that the hillocks of sand had taken on. It was black. No, even darker, almost as if, like a black hole, it drained light from the air around it. Or, like an inverse flame, it radiated darkness. Webster stopped walking. He turned towards this shape. It could be one of the counselors preparing for the bonfire tonight, after chapel. Yet this explanation made no sense. The fire pit was least eighty, ninety yards away, much closer to the chapel than this.

"Byron? Max?" he called, hoping to get a response from whoever was standing there. The silhouette had an undeniably mannish form: broad shoulders, wide chest. It may have been wearing a hat, but Webster couldn't be sure; he kept squinting his eyes to delineate the outline of the shadow against the dunes behind it.

Everything was still.

Had the wind stopped?

The figure raised its arm.

The harsh *kraw* of a crow cut through the night air, accompanied by the sound of wings, more leathered than feathery. Webster whipped his head around, trying to ascertain the location

of the sound; he felt a gust of seabreeze tousle his hair. Had the wind stopped or not? He looked back at the dunes.

The silhouette was gone.

Just down the beach he could make out the shape of a large bird with jagged edges flapping through the air. The crow.

Webster looked up at the sky, glistening with an eternity of stars. He thought it seemed now they were nothing more than indicators of the deeper blackness behind them, like glints of light reflected in the dimples of a vast dome of obsidian.

A chill of sudden dread surged up his spine. He blinked, and in opening his eyes he was crushed with a tangled mass of nausea and vertigo that caused him to double over and dry heave. He dropped his journal and Bible and clutched his knees with hands that twisted like pale vines over jagged rocks. As tears began to run down his face from the force of his heaving, Webster realized that he was more afraid now than he had been in a very long time. He felt something welling up inside him, almost as if a force was *pushing* his guts up through his throat. The sour taste of pre-vomit saliva filled up his mouth and then he was spilling out the contents of his stomach onto the boardwalk. Half-digested ham, broccoli, and applesauce splattered against the wood. He trembled uncontrollably.

Webster drew himself up and wiped the tears from his face with the back of his hands. He spit into the dunes. He picked up his books and realized that his hands still shook. As he walked the rest of the length to the chapel, he intentionally focused on the low, dim sliver of moon hanging in the sky in front of him. The shadow in the dunes could still be there, out of his sight. It could have grown, multiplied, and begun to swallow up the sand like an oil spill. It could be



right behind him. His stomach writhed inside him, as if trying to follow his dinner straight up through his esophagus and out of his mouth.

When he reached the chapel, he rinsed his mouth with water from the spicket that popped out from beneath the boardwalk as it met the walkway into the chapel. Webster's mind was all white noise and confusion, like a television screen warped by magnets, and the music emanating from within the chapel only compounded it. His hands were still shaking, as were his knees and shoulders. He grabbed the walkway railing to steady himself; he thought he might faint. His sight seemed to be fleeing his eyes; the light coming out of the chapel windows shrank into the night air. The silhouette was still out there, beneath a sparkling black sky that besieged his sight with an impossible openness. The silhouette was still in the walk-in freezer where Miss Carmen had seen it, heard it; it was in the forest, floating; it was in the middle of that damn plantation, flooded in the blood of-

The chapel doors opened.

“Web?”

It was Lorna.

“You feeling okay?”

Webster snapped to. The warm light and music of the chapel flew out of the doors and seemed to push the darkness away. His head cleared immediately. His stomach stopped churning.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, aware the trembling in his extremities had stopped. “I just, uh, got a little sick. I don't think dinner agreed with me, or, at least, agreed with capture-the-flag.”

She laughed, added a quick “But seriously, that sucks, sorry,” and held the door open for him. “This isn’t going to stop you from preaching, is it? I don’t think it would be good for you to spew all over the kids.”

“No, I think I’m alright. Really.” He did feel, incredibly enough, completely fine. He didn’t even have the usual hollow feeling of post-vomit.

Waiting for the campers to start filing in, Webster sat in his chair at the far end of the chapel and fingered through his journal. He tried to remember what had just happened. Already the memory of the encounter had become clouded, filled with floaters and traces of mistrust. His senses had been so trounced by his acute stomach affliction that it seemed like everything that happened on the boardwalk was an implanted recollection. He’d felt the wind on his face, he’d seen the stars in the night sky, but beyond that he couldn’t be sure. His mind’s eye held an increasingly vague image of figure in the dunes. Or had it been vague to begin with?

Campers began to file in as quietly as they could, their hundred combined whispers magnifying to a overhead static and rustle that matched the strum of Caleb’s guitar as he set the mood. The smell of sweaty, dirty, and utterly exerted bodies was considerable. Caleb began to pick up the tempo of his playing and led them into the song “God of Wonders.” The children’s tired voices warbled and wavered, yet they added to a sonic sense of peace that began to envelope the chaplain. Webster stopped thinking about the strangeness in the night. He went forward and delivered the invocation.

“The Lord Almighty grant us a peaceful night and a perfect end.”

“Amen,” the campers responded.

A series of liturgical call-and-response and prayers followed, each one drawing Webster further into a forgetfulness of the past week. He only wanted to say what he had to say about joy.

The time came for him to speak, so he got up, took the microphone from Caleb, and began to recount the story of his cheating roommate and the teacher who maintained his innocence.

“I was scared, y’all. I was so scared of what could happen if I was found guilty of academic fraud. My parents would be so ashamed, I could have a permanent black mark on my record, and I would never be able to go any farther in school! As I far as I was concerned, my life was about to be over! Can y’all imagine that? Your life being over before it really began?”

Webster remembered what that anxiety was like, as if his blood was replaced with motor oil and battery acid, fraying away his ability to get anything done. An image of the philosophy professor, Dr. Thomas, a striking woman in her late forties, flickered in his mind. Another image, his cheating friend, Gregory. Gregory, who had cheated because he had let him, had brushed it off like it was nothing. He was privileged, his father had given plenty of money to Sewanee, it was completely justified to cut corners. Webster’s reasoning had been slow, steady, never operating in leaps and bounds, but instead following, like him, the path of least resistance towards the easiest solution. *Don’t bother Greg. He’s a good friend. He’s bought me a lot of drinks.* Webster should have taken the shot as well. He should have leveled with the Honor Board about this.

“So I sat there in front of the Honor Board and I thought about this. I thought about losing it all, but then the most remarkable thing happened. Dr. Thomas came forward and stated that she believed I was innocent, that she knew me and didn’t think I would allow this to happen. And you know what? The Honor Board let me off. No problem. I was out of that room within five minutes, and I couldn’t believe it. Do you know why I found it so difficult to believe?”

It was happening. He was going to say it.

“It’s because *I was guilty*. I had let Greg borrow the paper for references, knowing that he was going to rip half of it off. I even looked at his finished paper and could tell where he had copy and pasted my paper onto his. But I did nothing to stop him. I was just as guilty in this as Greg. But I didn’t admit to it.”

A murmur arose from the campers. This was interesting. Out of his periphery Webster could sense Dart staring at him with a slightly cocked head, as if waiting for the rebound, the “just kidding!” of the story.

“See, I didn’t tell you the truth either this past week, and that’s because I was scared of what you’d think of me if I admitted to it. But the truth, the truth of the truth, I guess, is that I’m a very guilty person all around. I’m chaplain out here, but a lot of the time I don’t want to do my duties as chaplain. I’m not always a very nice person. In fact, in private, I can be really mean to other people. And myself. I’m a guilty person and I disguise that from you because I’m afraid of what you’ll think. I’m afraid that you’ll judge me.”

It occurred to him at this moment that he wasn’t necessarily talking to the campers anymore, but to the staff in the room. To Dart. To Lorna.

“Now, my teacher didn’t know this either, but she vouched for me. I got away with a bad thing, but I think that there’s a more important lesson behind this.”

A flurry of doubt shook up within his mind. Could he actually extricate a good “lesson” or moral from this? *Probably not.*

“Jesus knows that we’re guilty of a lot of stuff that we shouldn’t do. He knows that we lie to our parents, we steal from our friends, and that we hit our brother in the face when he’s being annoying, but he still-”

Webster paused, unsure whether he should introduce the concept blood atonement to this or not.

“He still stands before God the Father and points at us who believe in him and says, ‘This person is not guilty. I have made them clean.’ And it’s not like he’s lying, either. We were, and are still, made clean because Jesus, uh, he died on the cross so that we wouldn’t have to. His blood paid the price.”

He imagined his seminary professors grouped in the chapel’s back corner, shaking their heads.

“And that’s joy. That is why we have joy. Because we’ve all cheated, or we’ve helped our friends cheat, or we’ve hit our brother in the face when he totally deserved it, and Jesus steps in and forgives us and washes us clean and goes up before the Honor Board and says, ‘This boy, this girl, this person is not guilty.’

“I *was* guilty. I was *so* guilty. I was still guilty even after my teacher maintained that I wasn’t, but it gives you a picture of how Jesus can stand before his Father and rescue us from what we deserve. I’m not your chaplain because I’m the nicest person, or the godliest. Ask your staff member, I’m sure they’ll be honest with you.”

He smiled at Byron, who was seated within a circle of his campers. Byron, clearly confused, tried to smile back but only succeeded in baring his teeth at him. Webster felt the sudden urge to run, to bolt out through the sacristy to his right, hurl himself down the stairs, and flee into the dunes. He was too deep in his own story to pull a neat meaning out of this, and quick glances made to Dart and Lorna’s faces told him that there would be some questions.

*Disregard that, a voice called from within him, Go ahead and say what you need to say.*

“I deserve God’s judgement!” he heard himself say, louder than he ever would have dreamed saying those words. Oh, certainly, his abstract sense of human sin had included this little fact, but it had never been acknowledged in his mind, not even in passing. His own problems were punishment enough, never mind Jehovah’s retributive wrath.

“I deserve God’s judgement for my sin!” his voice reiterated. “But God took that judgement upon himself on the cross. What madness that is, to take another’s punishment, especially when you’ve done nothing wrong. Of course, there are those who accuse God of creating evil, because, they argue, how can anything exist apart from God? Therefore, evil must come from God!”

Webster had no idea where this was coming from. It just flowed. His sight captured the still images of small children cocking their heads in confusion, their faces held between their palms, squeezing them like dodgeballs.

“Yet, I answer them, look at the Book of Job! Look at the answer God gives Job, when Job questions God’s goodness. He simply points at the seas, at the stars, and he asks ‘Did you make this?’ It’s beautiful and stunning and maddening, yet somehow it’s more true than the human heart can comprehend. Jesus is that grandeur and madness in human flesh. He became knowable, the abstract word zipped up in the human form and condition. The royal majesty of God went head to head with the grime and dirt of humanity, and he died and rose again so we could know him.”

A part of Webster vaguely understood that the campers were no longer tracking with him, and neither were the staff. Hell, he wasn’t even tracking with himself. The words were spilling like so much vomit on the boardwalk.

“Do you follow me?”

A few, disparate nods.

“That’s joy! That’s knowing that God has collided with sin, and that although we can’t hope to stand before him on our own, he stands before himself on our behalf! Isn’t that incredible?”

Silence.

“Bow your heads. Let’s pray.”

It was as he prayed that his mind came to terms with the oddness of what had just happened. Webster would never deliver that obtuse, poorly constructed theological rambling in reality. These were eight year olds he was speaking to, not religious studies majors. Why on earth did he bring theodicy into the mix? Kids didn’t need to know that evil posed a major problem for God. Besides, it wasn’t like he found intellectual satisfaction with God’s explanation in Job anyway.

Webster realized the prayer was over. He said ‘Amen,’ and he walked back to his place at the wall. He leaned against the old wood and slid down into a sitting position. Where had that come from? The words had just sort of forced themselves out, kind of like automatic writing performed in a trance, or a bad celebrity impression induced by a hypnotist. It was like throwing up. He closed his eyes. Caleb had begun to sing “I Could Sing of Your Love Forever,” the chorus of which was the title line, sung over and over again into meaninglessness. The memory of vomiting on the boardwalk struck him, crystalline and unforgiving. He tasted it in his mouth, and then he saw the stars above him and the dunes around him, the shadow pointing with accusation. That shape, that creature had made him say what he had said.

It was time for him to serve communion. He opened his eyes and went back up to the front. The matzoh bread and grape juice lay in their respective containers upon the altar, a

polished piece of oak mounted upon four thick trunks of driftwood. As Webster began to say the necessary words of the liturgy, he broke off a piece of the matzoh and crushed it in his hand, kneading the crumbs to powder in his palm. Jesus had told his disciples that this was his body, broken for them. Theologians and scholastics had debated the meaning of this for centuries, and the Romans had accused early Christians of cannibalism, claiming that they feasted upon actual human flesh during communion. In school, Webster had been taught to present the elements of communion open-handedly, letting people glean whatever metaphorical or literal meaning that best behooved them. He opened his hand and licked the dusted bread off of it. He couldn't let any of it go to waste.

It seemed to Webster that he knew now what Jesus meant when he said that his body was bread, and that his blood was wine. Protestants preferred to stay away from the belief that elements of communion transmogrified into that which they represented, but he saw that Jesus was the representation of God made real, just as bread and wine are real. One could consume God as an abstract idea, but consuming Jesus as a concrete person, the sign unified with the signified, took more effort. He dipped two fingers into the juice cup and pressed them against his shirt, white and ratty, to stain it purple. Communion was acting out faith by experience, and the experience at hand was tasting and knowing that Jesus was real, and had lived and died and rose again, and there was no border between this world and the next.

If there were ghosts at camp, they could be touched.

Webster administered the elements to Lorna and Trish, the cupbearers, then gave them the juice cups. He knew that he had discovered something real and profound, but he didn't know how to tell that realization to each of the campers who came up to him. Usually he gave them a piece of matzoh and recited "the Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven" over them, like an



incantation. This time, though, he tacked “and Earth” on at the end, as if to make them understand that this was *real*. They were eating the divine and mundane all at once.

Communion ended and Webster slid back into his place against the chapel wall. He closed his eyes and drifted off into a slight doze, as if exhausted by the miraculous process he had taken part in, yet he was soon awoken by Dart’s voice.

“Hey, Web. Can I talk to you outside?”

His eyes opened and he saw that the chapel was nearly empty. Only a few campers remained praying with staff members. Their whispers expanded in the open space and Webster thought that he could hear every word they said, yet could not understand a single one. He looked at Dart and stood himself up. Dart motioned wordlessly and the two of them left the chapel and walked down to the beach, where the tide had edged nearly to the dunes. The wind whipped and whispered like the children in chapel, but Webster felt that he could understand what the wind was saying.

“Are you feeling okay, Web? Are you feeling sick or anything?” Dart had to raise his own voice to compete with the wind’s.

“No, I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

“You were sweating bullets up there, looking red as a lobster. Lorna told me you threw up right before this, too. And that sermon? My Lord, Web, what *was* that?” A hint of anger rose audibly in Dart’s voice. Anger was something Webster had yet to see fully formed in Dart, but he had always gotten the feeling that he never wanted to.

“It was like you had forgotten everything and just started panicking,” he continued, “and I don’t know what to think about you changing the story. Is it true? Were you really just cheating all along?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I think I just, um, remembered what actually happened. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to change the story.”

“Webster, you changing the story is not what’s upsetting me,” Dart was visibly agitated, running his fingers through his hair. “What’s upsetting me is that you changed it to a bunch of theological babbling that even I barely understood. These are second through fourth graders!”

He was yelling now.

“They’re at the ‘Jesus loves me, this I know’ stage of Christianity, not the, well, I don’t know if anyone’s ready for what you were talking about. Not anyone here, at least. That did nothing but confuse a lot of kids, and if I get phone calls from parents asking me why their children think God is evil, I’m coming to you.”

Webster stood still as a tree during this, only swaying slightly as the wind bid him. He already knew everything Dart was pushing at him, but he barely felt any remorse, guilt, or even embarrassment for it. Drowsiness was taking him in.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” Dart seemed to have calmed down. He placed the back of his hand against Webster’s forehead.

“Oh, wow. Web, you’re burning up. Don’t you feel that?”

“Feel what, particularly?”

“You’re burning up. We need to get your temperature checked. Come on.”

Dart took Webster to the infirmary, currently unstaffed by a camp nurse, and checked his temperature. 101.4 degrees fahrenheit. Webster swallowed some aspirin and Dart gave him a cold compress out of the fridge.

“You better get some sleep,” Dart said. “You want me to get you up in the morning?”

Webster nodded and turned to leave. He walked back to his cottage.

Back inside he changed into his flannel pajama bottoms and a sweatshirt, having gained awareness of the chills that had begun to wave through his body in a syncopated rhythm. After pouring himself a glass of water, he wrapped himself up in a blanket and sat down in his wicker easy chair. Webster felt sick, but his mind no longer felt drowsy. Instead, it felt more restless than ever, even while his body was proving sluggish and uncooperative. He reached out to grab the TV remote from the coffee table, but he noticed that it lay atop the binder from the office, the one labeled “CULTURE” in black, chunky marker print. He took this instead, having to use both hands to heft its weight, and turned his chair-side lamp on. Its incandescent bulb seemed impossibly old and gave off a deeply orange glow, the kind in parking lots and along suburban sidewalks.

He opened the binder to where he had last been reading, the interview between McCormack and Jacksie. The paper was ancient and thin, so he took great care in turning the pages. Still, he received a basic sensory pleasure from rubbing his fingertips along the paper’s edges and listening to the minute crinkles it emitted. The thought of dried skin came to his mind, as if this paper, or the interview itself, was the shell of a mummified body. Webster skimmed over what he’d already read, continuing into Jacksie explaining her youth and how she came to work for Miss Mary Rhett Seavey. He flipped forward several pages, feeling like he was searching for something in particular. When he saw the phrase “*weren’t nobody left alive,*” he knew that he was. Webster backtracked and started from the beginning.

*McCmk: Miss Hamilton-*

*JRH: Just Jacksie.*

*McCmk: Right, Miss Jacksie. The reason I’m doing this interview...did anybody tell you why I’m doing this interview?*

*JRH: No sir.*

*McCmk: Okay, well, the reason I'm doing this is because so very little is known about the actualities of the Hadden-Seavey revolt. You see, it got swallowed up in the general hooplah of a war starting, and any record kept by the soldiers who, uh, put the revolt down was lost to time. Now, no one's really shown a lot of interest in learning the truth until recently. Obviously, we don't have any first-hand accounts, but you are a very close link to Miss Seavey, who is notable for being one of the few known survivors.*

*JRH: So you want me to tell you all I know?*

*McCmk: If that would be unrealistic to ask, I understand...*

*JRH: No, I can tell you plenty. Miss Seavey wasn't much interested in dwelling on the past in the early days of me working for her. I remember sometimes I'd ask her 'bout her family, but she'd say nothing 'bout them 'cept 'They's all gone now. I don't like to talk about it.' That all changed when she got older, though. It weren't long after she had given Seavey Island to the church, when she knew her time was coming, with the cancer and all, that she started telling me all about what had happened. Now, remember, there can be plenty of this that ain't true. No telling what her imagination gone and made up, and what parts actually happened as she tell it. You see, she wasn't but a small girl at the time, no more than ten or 'leven, and memory ain't always the best servant. But I remember she had wrote a lot of this down, but I think it got lost in the estate sale.*

*[JRH pauses. Smacks lips.]*

*So where do I start? I'll just go from where I know to. So Miss Seavey was young in 1859, no more than six, but she remembered certain things real clear. For example, she knew the man that was in charge of her daddy's slaves was a negro, but she was never sure if he was a*

*slave hisself. His name was Gadley. Gadley Bull. He lived in the house, in the bottom of the house, but she remembered seeing him and running to him and calling him 'Gad.' She remembered that he'd give her piggyback rides 'round the house and such.*

*She remembered that her daddy owned a lot of slaves, a lot more than nearly anyone else. Over a hundred, but they were kept busy working the fields, the gin, the dock, the marshes, and the house. The Seavey house were the biggest plantation of its kind, I remember her telling me that a lot. There were so many slaves, but Mr. Seavey wanted to make sure they had a proper sense of religion. He had Gadley learn to read and write so he could preach to the slaves every Sunday morning. That was his tradition, to give his slaves Sunday morning free, and then make sure they work the rest of the day as hard as they could.*

*Of course, Miss Seavey remembered another slave who would sometimes preach, but her daddy didn't much like that. He was an old man at the time, and it seemed to Miss Seavey in hindsight that he was what we would call a 'conjure-man.'*

*McCmk: A 'conjure-man'?*

*JRH: Yes sir, like a witch-doctor. He settled arguments and worked magics for those who could pay him. Seems he was all about riling his people up at church services, getting them worked into a frenzy, talking about freedom and God's judgement on Pharaoh.*

*McCmk: Like liberation theology?*

*JRH: I suppose you could call it that. Miss Seavey always talked about how she'd hear her daddy and Gadley talk about their problems with conjure-man. Seemed to her that they couldn't get rid of him without starting a revolt, but letting him stay was just as liable to as well. You see, he was their healer and fortune-teller and preacher all rolled into one. He'd been there as long as anyone could remember, almost like he was a part of the plantation hisself, one of the*

*bricks at the very foundation of the house that looks like it's growing out of the ground. He delivered all the babies and buried all the bodies, and he never seemed to get no older as time passed along.*

*The problem with conjure-man was that his folks started believing that he could bust out of the plantation, no problem, but that he just chose not to. People made up stories, and Miss Seavey said she remembered this real good, about how they seen conjure-man flying through the woods in the night, or walking on the river in the early morning, just before dawn. They said he didn't sleep, but that he journeyed to another world while everyone else dreamed. Course, Mr. Seavey didn't believe none of this. He was more scared that conjure-man would poison him and his whole family using plants out in the swamp.*

*McCmk: How did Miss Seavey know this?*

*JRH: Oh, her being ten and all?*

*McCmk: Right.*

*JRH: Mr. McCormack, you'd be surprised what ten year olds pick up on? Between overhearing her parents and her nurses, she heard plenty 'bout conjure-man.*

*McCmk: Did he have a name, by the way? The conjure-man?*

*JRH: You know, she never said a name. Nothing more than conjure-man. Sometimes just plain 'Conjure,' like it was his first name or something. The man was a slave, so I 'spect it weren't too hard for his job and his name to become the same thing. And that's what happened with the way Mr. Seavey saw him. He got so caught up keeping his eye on conjure-man, afraid he was up to some dark, mean voodoo-working, that he never saw Gadley getting ready to lead a revolt, but that's what happened. Miss Seavey could never remember the exact date, but she thought it was just about Christmas Eve. She told me this story a lot, about how she remembered*

waking up real early in the morning, at least an hour before dawn, and her mama was in her room, telling her and her sisters that it was time for her to go while some big, dark man stood in the doorway. She said she remembered in particular the way that her mother was crying, not making a sound but letting the tears flow free down her face. The man in the door turned out to be one of the field hands, and it weren't long before Miss Seavey realized that things were very different now. They took her and her family to their dining room and there she saw Gadley, but he wasn't being tied up like them, no, he was telling people what to do, sending them this and that way. There were fewer than two dozen white folks on the island, the family and the foremen combined, and they had all been taken prisoner in their beds.

That was the way that Gadley had wanted it, see. He and conjure-man worked to make it look like the conjure-man was preparing to incite a riot, what with his sermons and all, while Gadley figured out how to get guns and to get the slaves to work up enough work to revolt. A big old boat had come down the coast to pick up a shipment of cotton bales, and Gadley was planning on taking over the plantation, commandeering this boat, loading all the slaves up on it, and then making the crew sail them back up North, where they could be free.

McCmk: Sounds like a feasible escape plan.

JRH: It sure were. And the best part is that when it happened, no white man on the island saw it coming. Gadley was a house-nigger; he wouldn't never do something like take over the plantation. It was assumed that the slaves all hated him, being their foreman and all. He was the one who drove them to work, he was the one who lashed their backs raw. Miss Seavey thought her daddy did this on purpose so that they wouldn't hate him as their punisher, but that they would hate Gadley instead.

*But anyway, they were all brought into the dining room, Miss Seavey and her two sisters, her mama and daddy, their cousins, and-*

*McCmk: Sorry, I just have a quick question about the number of whites at Seavey. You said earlier no more than two-dozen?*

*JRH: Yes sir. That's what Miss Seavey always held to.*

*McCmk: It's interesting that she said that. You see, most sources, not that there are many, have always stated that the Seavey family themselves were the only whites on the island.*

*JRH: Oh, yes, I remember her saying something to that effect. Seemed that her daddy wanted to people to believe that the slaves on the island obeyed him so much that there weren't need for other whites. Truth is, he believed it himself enough that he had no more than ten armed men.*

*McCmk: Which, I assume, would hardly be enough to stop a full-fledged rebellion, even if it wasn't at night?*

*JRH: Probably. Miss Seavey said that she never saw the white foremen during that night. They never appeared in the house. It was just her family and the cotton boat's crew. They were held there for the rest of the night while Gadley made sure everything got ready. She said she remembered how silent they all were, both her family and the slaves guarding them. Whenever her little sister started crying her mama would hush her up real quick. The house slaves, the maids and the butlers, were all there too, and although Gadley didn't know it, one of them had run off as soon as the revolt had started. She ran all the way to Johns Island, all the way through the night...although maybe she didn't run all the way. Maybe she took a horse. Or a carriage. Anyway, I'm not sure how, but the fact of the matter is that one of the house slaves took off to go tell the soldiers over on Johns Island.*



*McCmk: You have any idea why a slave would turn in other slaves?*

*JRH: Well, I suppose I don't have a full grasp on it, but it wouldn't be unreasonable, in my opinion, to believe that Gadley kept the whole thing a secret from the house slaves. There was, I'm sure, a sort of rivalry between the slave groups, and the house slaves, or at least this one lady in particular, felt a strong kind of loyalty to the Seaveys. Gadley didn't count on this, and within the day, while they're still working on getting the boat ready, a whole group of soldiers, at least a hundred, shows up.*

*Now the slaves weren't completely caught off guard. Miss Seavey remembers all sorts of shouts and shooting at first, but that only lasted a minute or so. The soldiers found out the slaves were armed and so they backed off. Gadley was as mad as a stung bear, though, so he comes in and starts screaming at Mr. Seavey, saying that he set them up for this, and that they were all going to die, and that he was to blame for it, Pharaoh that he was. Mr. Seavey was a proud man, so he spit the words right back at Gadley, and somehow, one ways or another, Gadley starts stringing up Mr. Seavey right there in the middle of the dining room, in front of his family, using the chandelier or whatnot. Miss Seavey said she could never fully remember that part, probably because she willed herself to forget. A man hanging to death is a terrible thing, especially when he is hoisted, not dropped.*

*[extended pause]*

*McCmk: Miss Jacksie?*

*JRH: Ah yes, sorry, I was lost in my mind. Anyway, not long after that the night starts to come, and the soldiers start moving back in, probably because they didn't want the slaves escaping in the dark. They start lighting fires to spook the slaves, and someone lights the ship on fire, and that's when all sorts of hell comes down on the place. The slaves realize they stuck, but*

*they all know Gadley killed Mr. Seavey, turning the rebellion violent. Miss Seavey remembered because they talked about it right in front of her and her daddy's hanging body. So they decide to fight to the death. And that's what they did. How Miss Seavey escaped was always a mystery to me, but she was the only one of her family. Rumor always had it that a couple of slaves escaped into the marsh, too, but that's just been a rumor. At the end, weren't nobody left alive.*

McCormack, dressed in a well-fitted seersucker suit, leaned forward and ran his hand through his lavish pompadour of chestnut hair. "Miss Jacksie," he asked, tired, as if he had asked this question innumerable times before, "how do *you* think Miss Seavey escaped?"

"Well," Jacksie said, "I suppose she had to have had help. Weren't no way a little girl like her could have gotten away without someone getting her out, which makes me think that some slaves definitely did escape." She picked up a mug of rough fired clay and took a sip. Webster could smell the earthy aroma of whatever liquid was held inside. The woman's eyes, though lined with crow's feet, shone bright with attentive vigor. Her hair, straight white with five or six visible streaks of black, contrasted with and strengthened the rich cocoa color of her skin. She didn't look a day over fifty. He somehow knew that she had just celebrated her 72nd birthday the week before.

McCormack looked at the mint-colored recorder sitting on the table beside them and tapped his pen on the legal pad of yellow paper that rested by his right arm. He seemed to be thinking through implications, running possible scenarios through his head.

It was at this point that Webster realized that he was sitting in a small, dusty room, across the table from a much younger McCormack and Jacksie. He could feel the air, chill like late winter, and see the sun shifting from eleven o' clock to high noon outside the window. He was dreaming, he knew. It failed to phase him.

“Miss Jacksie,” McCormack asked as he leaned back in his chair, “what do you think could have happened to those escaped slaves?”

She looked down at her lap and smoothed out her faded denim skirt. “Suppose I can’t rightly say, but I speculate that they could lived out in the swamps, getting by till they could leave the South, get to freedom.”

“Right, right...” McCormack trailed off, apparently trying to pick up on some loose thread of Jackie’s story. “What about conjure-man? What happened to him?”

“Oh, him,” Jacksie looked up at McCormack. Her eyes gave off an effervescent glow. “He still here, don’t you know. Still walk with us, talk with us. He know you, McCormack.”

Webster felt the chair beneath him shrink. He realized that the proportions of his surroundings were starting to slip into dream-logic. His head surged towards the ceiling, and he had to crouch to keep from bursting through like a whale breaking the water. McCormack, on the other hand, was growing smaller where he sat. He looked like a ventriloquist dummy. Indeed, he had *become* a ventriloquist dummy, dressed in a plasticine hairpiece and a dummy-sized seersucker suit. Only Jacksie remained proportionate to her seat. It had become harder to see things.

Jacksie lifted her chin and stared at Webster. Her eyes were no longer shining. They were black.

“He know you too, Webster. I know you.”

Jacksie was no longer Jacksie, she was the shadow, the lurking silhouette. Her brown skin and denim dress sloughed off and revealed an absence, chasmic and terrible, in the shape of a man. Its legs and arms stretched out like spider-limbs, and darkness began to bleed from the form as it became larger and larger. Webster tried to move, to scream, but found that he could

not. He was paralyzed. No, he was a dummy just like McCormack, a cracked smile painted on a wooden face. He had no choice but stare, unblinking, at the ebon creature that towered over him.

This was conjure-man.