

## Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God

The boys filed into the tabernacle, laughter and conversation echoing off the old rugged pews. They had been grouped by cabins, each cabin with its own corresponding row, totaling ten rows. The counsellor for each cabin sat on the end of the pew, closest to the middle aisle. Tyler and Collin sat at the opposite their counsellor at the other end of the pew.

“Did you bring it?” Tyler asked, careful to keep his voice at a whisper.

“Yeah, hold on,” Collin said. He rummaged through his pockets and pulled out a clenched fist. He reached down to tie his shoe while Tyler looked around the room. The counsellors were still walking around, mingling with some of the younger teens who still hung on their every word. Beyond them, he could see the girls walking up the path, single file, cabin by cabin. He knew that Jesse’s cabin would be at the end of the line, which meant she would be seated in the back row. Everything was perfect.

Collin sat back up and followed Tyler’s gaze.

“Girls are coming,” he said.

“No shit,” Tyler responded, taking a pencil from the holder on the bible rack attached to the pew in front of them, and clumsily knocking a second pencil to the ground.

“Whoops,” he said, bending down to retrieve it. As he picked up the pencil from the bare concrete, Collin moved his foot, revealing a green lighter. Tyler extended a stealth pinky and flipped the lighter into his palm. Rising, he returned the pencil to its proper location and in the same fluid movement brought his hand to his shirt pocket where, like an illusionist, he dropped the lighter and exchanged it for a pack of travel tissues. He extracted a single tissue and blew his nose, then dropped the used tissue on the seat next to him and slipped the rest of the pack back into his pocket.

“Just remember,” Collin said quietly from the side of his mouth, keeping watchful eyes on the girls and the counsellors, “you didn’t get that from me.”

Tyler covered his mouth and coughed into his hand with a barely audible, “Don’t worry about it.” He checked his watch impatiently. The last time he remembered being this excited for the evening tabernacle service to begin was two years ago, when he had been one of the naïve thirteen-year-olds sitting at the other end of the pew next to the counsellor.

“I see her,” Collin announced.

“Dude,” Tyler said, elbowing his friend in the ribs, “shut the hell up. Don’t stare.”

Looking toward the back row of the girl’s side, Tyler spotted her. She had her head down, her hair covering her face. He continued to stare at her for a very long time until she lifted her gaze and looked directly back at him with a subtle half-smile, and for one eternal moment, the rest of the world fell away.

A discordant E major rang out across the room, reverberating from the back wall and spilling out of the open sides of the old building and into the summer twilight, followed by a not-so-delicate journey up and down the scale as Sister Sarah Dewey gave the signal for everyone to take their seats. She was wearing a yellow dress tonight, the same modest design that she owned in every color of the rainbow, each corresponding to her husband’s dress shirt. Brother Jonah Dewey strode to the center of the stage, well-cropped goatee and no tie. He beckoned everyone to stand and sing praises to God as his wife banged out the melody. One male and one female counsellor stood on either side of him performing each song’s motions for their respective half of the room.

*I’ve got peace like a river,*

*I’ve got peace like a river,*

*I've got peace like a river in my soul!*

The tabernacle was situated on a hill in the middle of the camp. From the east side one could view the swimming pool with its eight-foot privacy fence. Tyler and Collin had managed to sneak away from their group to this optimal viewing location during the girls' swim time on several occasions over the past couple summers. Beyond the pool was the dining hall and gymnasium, and just north of that was the boys' cabins. Tyler turned his gaze to the west side where the setting sun had painted the sky red. The sports fields and girls' cabins were on that side. As far as the east is from the west, so far had Dewey's separated the boys from the girls. Surveying the other half of the room, Tyler located the girls who had arrived at the camp with his church group at the beginning of the week. They wouldn't see each other but from a distance until Saturday morning when the buses arrived to take them home. But he wasn't interested in them tonight. There was only one girl that mattered. He noticed her on the first day, as she stepped off the New Light Baptist bus. She was wearing a Nirvana t-shirt, her black hair was shaved to stubble on one side and shoulder length on the other with a streak of bleached gold. From that moment it had become his mission in life to find out who she was and to make contact. He memorized the faces of the boys in her group and sought them out that very day. Once he had learned her name, he reached out to her in the only way that was allowed by Dewey Law.

Campers received three daily meals and during those times they were permitted to leave notes for one another. The dining hall was arranged like the tabernacle—girls on one side, boys on the other. At the end of the center aisle they had placed a large bowl to regulate the flow of information. It was common knowledge that the counsellors trusted with monitoring the bowl were lenient to the point of neglect.

Tyler obsessed for most of the first day over what he would write to her until finally settling on:

*Cool Nirvana shirt. They'll probably say you can't wear it though.*

He kicked himself in the teeth for a full twenty-four hours over all the things he should have said instead, and by the following evening he was convinced that he had come off like a creep and scared her away. Until the second night when they called his name at dinner. He opened her note with fear and trembling.

*You're right, they told me I can't wear it. I can't wear most of the clothes I brought because they violate the dress code. They gave me some ugly camp clothes to wear. What kind of summer camp doesn't allow shorts? This place sucks.*

Over the next three days they wrote back and forth, venting, commiserating, and comparing tastes in music and movies. Tyler had taken up smoking in the past year and was delighted to learn that they had that in common. Jesse had discovered that her counsellor also smoked and had a pack of cigarettes stashed in her foot locker. By Thursday night's service they had devised a plan to swipe one and smoke it behind the tabernacle during the final service.

By the time Sister Sarah Dewey was hammering the keys on the fourth and final song, Tyler had amassed a conspicuous pile of used tissues on the seat next to him. Catching his counsellor's eye, he held up the pile in pointed at his nose, to which the counsellor responded with a subtle thumbs up and a nod. Tyler moved toward the restroom, looking over his shoulder. Once he was sure that no one was watching him, he ducked out the side and darted around back. There were bails of hay stacked four high and two deep all along the back wall that were to be used for seating during tomorrow's campfire service. Tyler leaned against these and waited.

The music was wrapping up.

*Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burnin', burnin', burnin'*

*Give me oil in my lamp, I pray*

Soon the young Dewey's would leave the stage and Jonah Dewey's father, Clarence would appear to remind everyone of the horrors that awaited them in Hell if they did not repent.

Tyler had heard this message many times before and could almost recite it word for word.

After a few minutes, Jesse appeared.

"Hi," she said.

"Hey," he replied, and both looked down at their shoes.

Tyler pulled out the lighter and she produced the cigarette, placing it between her lips. He cupped his hand around the tip and lit it for her. As she took the first drag, he fumbled his words like a stuttering fool until something resembling a coherent sentence came out.

"I like your hair."

He cringed within himself at his own fat-headedness as she held out the cigarette and laughed. Their fingers touched briefly as he took it and Tyler's blood quickened.

"Thanks," she said. "I did it to piss off my step-mom. She's this uber-Christian, which means now the rest of us are supposed to be, too. She sent me here to get back at me." She crinkled her nose in disgust. "I can't believe they make all the girls wear skirts. It's demeaning."

"Yeah," Tyler said, passing the cigarette back to her, "there's a lot of dumb rules. My dad's a deacon and our church supports the camp. They send me here every summer. The only way I'm going to get out of it next year is if I get a job."

Jesse let the smoke roll out of her mouth and breathed it in through her nostrils as she passed the cigarette back to him. He watched her in awe.

"Why would you want to miss out on all this quality entertainment?" she said with a sarcastic smile.

He laughed. "I know, right?"

"And how about that scoreboard in the dining hall," she continued. "Sixty-three souls saved so far this week? Five hundred this year?"

"You know," Tyler said, "at least half of those are the same kids that got saved last year."

"Really?"

Tyler nodded.

"There are a few kids here that get saved every year. It's supposed to be a one and done kind of deal—like, once saved always saved. The Dewey's either don't notice, or they let it slide in order to beef up their stats."

"Are you saved?"

"Ever since I was six years old."

"Really?"

"Yep."

She gave him an inquisitive look.

"Is smoking behind the tabernacle with a strange girl really something a saved person would do?" she asked.

Tyler looked at the cigarette in his hand and began stuttering out a series of inarticulate syllables until finally she gave him a playful shove.

"I'm just messing with you, man. Relax."

They both laughed.

"To tell the truth," he said after a few moments, "I'm not really sure what I believe in these days."

"Yeah," she replied. "Me neither."

As he extended his hand to pass her the dwindling cigarette, they heard footsteps from the west side of the building followed by the voice of one of the counselors.

"Hey, is somebody back here?"

"Shit," Tyler said under his breath, dropping the cigarette and grabbing her hand. "Come on, this way."

They hurried around the east side and returned quickly to their seats. Tyler glanced at his counselor who seemed to be focused on the sermon that was now in progress.

"You smell like smoke," Collin said quietly, sliding him a stick of gum.

He looked around the room for the counselor that had nearly caught them but could see nothing unusual. No one appeared suspicious, no one was looking for them. Glancing toward the back row of the girl's section he made eye contact with Jesse. Her eyes were wide, but she was smiling. She made a *that was close* gesture with the back of her hand across her forehead.

"And the Bible says, in Hell he lifted his eyes!" Brother Clarence Dewey slammed his fist down on the old oak pulpit to emphasize *Bible*. His voice trembled with great emotion as he prophesied, sweat dripping from his double chin and quivering jowls. "In Hell," dramatic pause, "he lifted up his eyes. The Bible says that it is a place of torment. Where the fire is not quenched. And the worm dieth not. A place where everything about you that was made in the image of God is stripped away and you are left with only your thoughts and regrets for all of eternity while you are burned with a fire that will not consume. The Bible says the man called out to Abraham for mercy. 'Oh, Father Abraham, send Lazarus that he might dip his finger in

water and place but a drop on my tongue for I am in agony!’ But Abraham answered, ‘You had your chance while you were alive on earth, while you pursued every vain thing that your heart desired. That time is past. It’s too late for you now.’

Brother Clarence Dewey pointed a boney finger out across the room.

“The Bible says that it is appointed unto man once to die, but after this the judgement. Death will come for all of us. For many of you, it will come when you least expect it—like a thief in the night. Some who are sitting in this room now, who are hearing these words and thinking, ‘well, he’s not talking about me’. You think you’re safe. You think you’re secure. You think the Lord doesn’t see your sin. Some of you who are sitting within the sound of my voice, disregarding this warning...it’s entirely possible that some of you won’t make it until the end of this year before you lift up your eyes in Hell.”

The room was silent. The younger campers were transfixed as Brother Dewey’s voice rose and fell with a mesmeric, tremolo-infused cadence.

“Death comes for us all. You can’t escape it. I’d dare say that there’s even a chance that some of you won’t make it until the morning before you,” he smacked the pulpit with his bible, causing many to jump, “lift up your eyes in Hell!”

His eyes were wild as he paced back and forth, waving the book and shouting like a man possessed by God himself. “Therefore, repent! Flee that doomed city of Sodom! Run to the hills and don’t turn back to look lest ye be damned!”

At that very moment smoke began to pour into the room through the small gap between the corrugated metal wall and the concrete floor. A pile of books and a few boxes that were stacked on an abandoned pew resting against the wall caught fire and it spread quickly up one of the wooden beams that supported the roof of the tabernacle.



Somebody shouted “*fire!*” and the room erupted with panic.

Tyler and Collin ran out of the east side and down the hill. They stopped when they felt like they were a safe distance and turned around to see the entire building ablaze and people running in every direction.

“Whoa,” said Collin, “that just happened.”

As they stood watching the tabernacle burn, Collin had a moment of clarity.

“Dude,” he said, slapping Tyler’s shoulder with the back of his hand. “You gotta ditch that thing somewhere good. If you get caught with it, you didn’t get it from me.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Tyler said. He put his hand in his pocket and gripped the lighter.

Counselors were trying to round up the campers and perform a head count, while Brother Clarence Dewey could be seen on his knees as close to the inferno as he could get, crying out to God for mercy and babbling about the final judgment of mankind.

Tyler felt Jesse’s soft fingers as she emerged from the chaos and took his other hand.

“Oh my god,” she said, squeezing his hand. “Everyone got out, right?”

“Yeah,” he said, squeezing back, his voice trembling with uncertainty. “I think so.”

They looked at one another and he could see the blaze reflected in her eyes. Her face was a mixture of doubt, wonder, and rebellion. The most beautiful thing he had ever seen.